FROM NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ROU BAO BU CHI ROU
CASE FILE
COMPENDIUM
Bing An Ben
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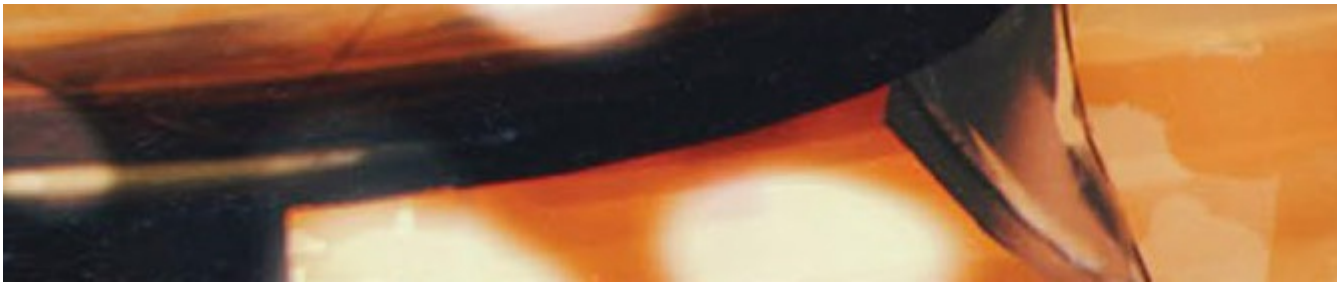

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CASE FILE COMPENDIUM: BING AN BEN VOL.

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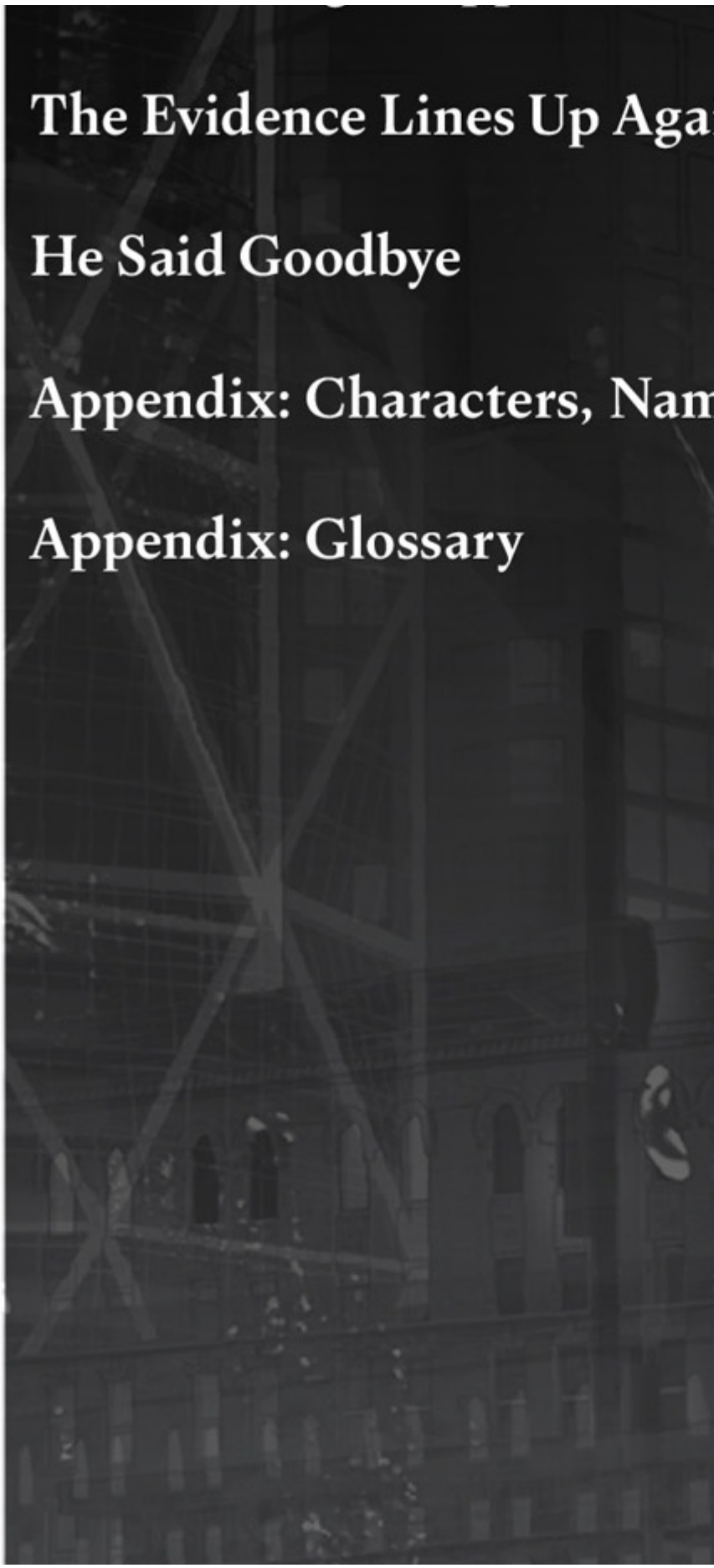


Chapter 149:
Spiraling Out of Control

XIE QINGCHENG made his way home filled with a mix of complex feelings.

On the one hand, he found himself increasingly reluctant to hurt He Yu. On the other, it was becoming steadily apparent that he couldn't do what he'd said he would—help him get over it—when He Yu first confessed his feelings to him. It seemed he was helplessly doomed to slowly sink into that mire along with him. The hottest thing in the world was a person's true feelings; whether mortal steel or glacial ice, all would melt in the face of sincere affection.

This made Xie Qingcheng feel uncomfortable, even wary. That steel was his armaments, and the ice his heart. He needed both for survival, and another person's emotions were useless to him—this was an unalterable fact.

"Ge, you're back."

When he arrived at his dormitory, he found He Yu by the door with his backpack slung over his shoulder. He was the picture of docility standing there, watching him in a white hoodie that made him look all the more like the student he was. Xie Qingcheng shot him a glance before unlocking the door.

He Yu hadn't eaten dinner yet. He made his way into the dorm with the ease of familiarity and picked up the mug that Xie Qingcheng had set out for him, gulping down water like he was desperately thirsty. Once he'd drunk his fill, he put down his backpack, settled down on the thick carpet by the tea table, and started doing his homework as usual. This had been his routine ever since the Zhilong Entertainment case had been solved.

At first Xie Qingcheng had paid him no mind, allowing him to do as he pleased. Jiang Liping had said that Duan Wen didn't appear to have any plans for He Yu at the moment, but all the same, the fact that his organization knew about the blood toxin left him feeling uneasy. It was just as well that He Yu wanted to come see him. If nothing else, it gave him the opportunity to modify the wrist monitor he had given He Yu, to add an emergency alert system.

But as time went on, He Yu's presence had started to bother him. Xie Qingcheng took out a can of beer from the refrigerator, cracked it open, and took a few sips to quench his thirst. His tolerance for alcohol was low, but a beer was just right. The ice-cold liquid slid down his throat, calming his anxious heart.

He turned to He Yu. "What do you want to eat?"

He Yu answered without looking up from his homework. "I want white asparagus with truffle."

"Where do you expect me to get white asparagus and truffle?"

"Then I'll have monkfish stew."

"Shall I go and catch you a fresh one right now?"

"Then…" He was about to name another dish when he saw that the beer can in Xie Qingcheng's hand was deforming in his irritated grip. He Yu changed tack.

“I’ll have anything, actually. I’m very low-maintenance. Even frozen dumplings are fine if you can bear to feed them to me.”

Busy man that he was, Xie Qingcheng did actually end up boiling a bag of frozen dumplings for the kid. He Yu stared at the plate, feeling a bit crestfallen. After hesitating at length, he still couldn’t bring himself to lift his chopsticks. He wanted to order out, but since that would probably anger Xie Qingcheng, in the end he very reluctantly took a few bites. As he chewed through the filling, he couldn’t help but feel that they didn’t taste quite right.

“Xie-ge, do you know how to make dumplings from scratch?”

Xie Qingcheng shot him a glance. “I don’t have the time.”

The boy’s expression turned even more despondent.

Xie Qingcheng had once wanted nothing more than to personally bury the little bastard alive, so logically speaking, the sight of He Yu’s upset face shouldn’t have affected him like this. Yet somehow, he found it difficult bearing He Yu’s disappointed expression, as if he was a father witnessing his son’s sadness over not being able to buy his favorite toy. All in all, this made him very uncomfortable.

Thus, the godfather spoke without thinking: “…Fine. Next time I’ll make them myself.”

He regretted the words the moment they left his mouth, but He Yu’s drooping head perked up immediately. Xie Qingcheng said he would make his own dumplings next time! The very same Doctor Xie who had only ever told him “It’s never happening again”! He was so happy that even the plate of store-bought dumplings no longer seemed to present any difficulty. Not only did he clean his plate, he scrounged up a bottle of fruit-flavored fortified yogurt—something that he previously would never have touched—from the depths of the refrigerator and began to drink it with great relish.

Xie Qingcheng ate a handful of dumplings to take the edge off of his hunger before making a phone call to the laboratory. He Yu didn’t understand the technical jargon he used, but nevertheless found himself entranced by the one-sided conversation. Xie Qingcheng’s voice was simply very pleasant to listen to. Deep and magnetic, it was a quintessentially male bass voice, reminiscent of a handsome and domineering businessman from a romance audio drama. As he listened, he felt as though the wrinkles that creased his heart were being ironed smooth by the man’s prepossessing voice.

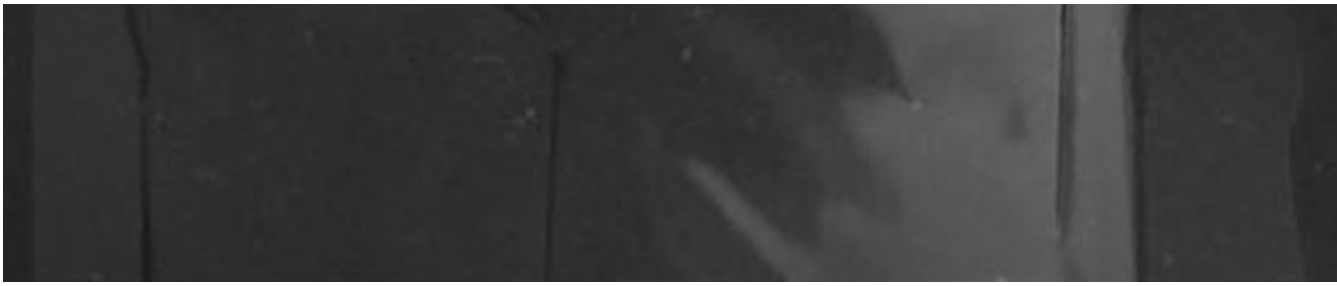
The phone call went on for nearly an hour, and Xie Qingcheng ended up developing a slight cough from talking for so long. After a moment of thought, He Yu rummaged through the refrigerator and found another bottle of yogurt, which he tried to hand to him. Xie Qingcheng turned his face away from the disturbance, his brow wrinkling slightly as he continued speaking with the person on the other end of the line. He Yu opened the bottle, intending to deliver the drink straight into Xie Qingcheng’s mouth, but he moved too quickly and ended up smearing yogurt all over his lips and cheek. Turbid white fluid was spattered all over Xie Qingcheng’s handsome but solemn face.

He couldn’t stand it anymore. He split his attention from his call to hiss at He Yu, “Don’t point that thing at me—I don’t want it in my mouth!”

There was nothing exceptional about a bad-tempered university professor, but a bad-tempered professor with his face covered in such suggestive-looking white

liquid was a rare sight. Just looking at him made something restless unfurl in He Yu's heart, and his unintentionally provocative words only made things worse. He Yu subconsciously licked his lips, wanting to kiss him, wanting to lick up all that yogurt from his skin bit by bit.

On the other end of the call, Xie Qingcheng's conversation partner heard him go from a detailed discussion about chemical syntheses and purification processes to a sudden adamant refusal. "What do you mean you don't want it in your mouth?" he asked, utterly confused. "What don't you want in your mouth?"



“It’s nothing.” Xie Qingcheng shot He Yu a look, then grabbed a few tissues and wiped his face. “I have a friend over; I was just talking to him.”

Xie Qingcheng would never have considered him a “friend” before, so this seemed like something worth celebrating. But it wasn’t what He Yu wanted. He wanted all of Xie Qingcheng—he wanted all of his heart.

The truth was, ever since the dust settled in the aftermath of the Zhilong Entertainment case, He Yu had been reminiscing constantly about that life-or-death moment in the basement, Xie Qingcheng kissing him amid a sea of fire. That kiss had been unfeeling, yet sincere; Xie Qingcheng knew that He Yu loved him, but had nothing to offer in return. Out of guilt, the kiss had become a remedy for his broken heart.

He still remembered how Xie Qingcheng’s eyes looked in that moment: incredibly beautiful, glimmering like colored glass in the glow of the fire as they gazed at him. As if to say, *I’m sorry, Little Devil. I can’t give you any more affection than this.* Stemming his bleeding only to stab him once more; breaking his heart only to seduce his soul.

If they had died back then, he thought, the first thing he would’ve done when he got to hell would be to fuck Xie Qingcheng. It was his fault for seducing him in the first place; He Yu wouldn’t let him get away with it even if he died.

Just as he began to lose himself in his fantasies, Xie Qingcheng coughed again.

He Yu was out of options. “How much longer will you be on this call?” he asked quietly, setting the yogurt aside.

“Pretty long.” Xie Qingcheng checked his watch. “If you’re tired, you should go home. I’ll just end up disturbing you.”

“Another hour?”

“At least two more hours.”

This was the problem with being into uncles: They focused primarily on their work, and they cared about little else while they were busy with their jobs. The unspeakably restless young man had no choice but to linger in the bathroom for nearly an hour. He even took a shower while he was there. When he came back out, Xie Qingcheng was still on the phone, coughing as he spoke. He Yu thought for a moment, then turned around and went into the kitchen.

There were a few pears and some rock sugar in the refrigerator. After looking up a recipe online, He Yu was just about to start cooking when his cell phone suddenly began to ring.

“Hi, Mom.”

The caller was Lü Zhishu, under orders from Duan Wen to take good care of He Yu. “It’s so late. You haven’t gone to bed yet?”

Wedging the cellphone between his shoulder and ear, He Yu went back to cutting his pear. “Not yet.”

“Are you in your dorm?”

“…I’m at someone else’s house.”

“Who?”

He was reluctant to tell her. His mentality was like that of a middle schooler who didn't want his parents to know that he was dating. He knew that Lü Zhishu and He Jiwei would never accept that he had fallen in love with a man thirteen years his senior, never mind the fact that the man in question was Xie Qingcheng.

So he didn't respond to her question. "Mom, what do you need?"

"See, about your illness…and the incident with Huang Zhilong—I've been thinking about it for a while, and it all makes me feel very uneasy. I can't stop worrying about you, and it just so happens that the project that I'm currently working on in Yanzhou is almost over. After that all my business is going to be in Huzhou, so I'm thinking about moving back to Huzhou long-term."

He Yu went still. After a long silence, he asked, "You'll be staying in Huzhou for good?"

"That's right. I'm coming back next month."

He considered this carefully, but couldn't feel any semblance of joy about it.

Lü Zhishu had been seeking reconciliation with him for quite a while now. For his part, he had also been trying to thaw his relationship with his parents, but they had been estranged for a long time, and he didn't rely on her like He Li did.

"Do you need me to do anything in preparation?" he asked anyway.

Lü Zhishu chuckled. "No, I've already instructed the housekeeper to take care of everything. However, there's one thing I need to talk to you about."

"Go on."

"I intend to hire Doctor Anthony as our live-in family physician. That room that Doctor Xie used before—can you check and see if there's anything in there that needs to be cleared out? We can have Anthony stay there."

The fruit knife held between He Yu's slender fingers went still, its tip hovering over the flesh of the pear that he was about to disembowel. There was a long pause. "The reception went bad just now, and I couldn't hear you," he said at last. "Can you please say that again?"

Lü Zhishu didn't notice the strange note that had entered his voice. She'd always thought that He Yu liked Xie Xue, and assumed that the only reason why he deigned to acknowledge Xie Qingcheng was out of consideration for her. "I said, let's clear out Xie Qingcheng's old room for Doctor Anthony," she repeated carelessly. "It's not like it's being used anyway."

He slowly sliced through the pear. Sticky juice spurted everywhere, soaking his hand.

"Mom, when have I ever said that I needed a live-in physician?"

She paused, finally detecting the chill in He Yu's voice. "He Yu, I'm worried about you. I want you to get better as soon as possible. Doctor Anthony is an expert in this field and he's skilled in hypnotherapy. With him here—"

He Yu cut her off. "I don't think I need to bewitch myself with hallucinations. I'm using that room, so please don't enter uninvited. And I don't need Anthony living in my house. If you let him move in, I'll find somewhere else to live and stop coming back."

"You…you're just speaking out of anger…"

“I’m not speaking out of anger,” He Yu said. “I’m just telling the truth.”

“He Yu—”

“I’m busy, so if there’s nothing else, I’m hanging up.”

He neither liked nor disliked Anthony. But that room was reserved for Xie Qingcheng. He wouldn’t allow anyone other than the two of them to enter those summer hydrangea-engraved doors.

He simmered the snow pear with rock sugar on the stove for an hour before scooping the lot into a porcelain cup and carrying it over to Xie Qingcheng’s computer desk. Xie Qingcheng was still wearing his glasses, checking over a document as he spoke with his collaborator through a headset.

“Professor,” He Yu cut in. “It’s been two hours. How much longer are you going to be on the phone?”

Xie Qingcheng was so focused on his task that he hadn’t noticed He Yu was still there. “You didn’t leave?” he asked, startled.

He Yu shook his head.

Assuming he had been sleeping in his room, Xie Qingcheng asked, “Did I disturb you?”

He Yu shook his head again.

“Wait for me. I’ll be done in half an hour.”

He Yu burst out laughing. This guy was always so tense. “Forget it, it’s okay. Take your time.”

But Xie Qingcheng genuinely thought that He Yu couldn’t sleep because of the noise he was making, so he ended his call right on time. He exhaled, about to turn and say something, when a shadow fell over him—He Yu had already stepped forward to stand beside his chair. A lidded porcelain bowl was shoved into Xie Qingcheng’s hand. It was very warm, the heat of He Yu’s amorous desire chopped up and stewed directly into his heart.

After a brief, stunned silence, Xie Qingcheng removed the lid.

“Where did you buy sweet snow pear stew?”

He Yu smiled at him in silence.

Xie Qingcheng examined the sweet soup. The bitter core of the pear had been removed, the fruit’s tough skin carefully peeled off. The pear was stuffed with finely ground fritillary bulbs and immersed in sugar water that seemed to flow directly from the boy’s heart; ripe with undisguised sweetness and heat.

Returning to his senses, he looked back at He Yu. “You…”

“Smart, aren’t I?” He Yu lifted his eyebrows as he reached out to cup Xie Qingcheng’s face in his hands. “I figured out how to make it no problem; it was a piece of cake. Now, hurry up and eat it while it’s still warm.”

Xie Qingcheng stared at him. The porcelain cup in his hand suddenly felt too hot to hold. It had been…twenty years since he had eaten such a carefully made bowl of snow pear soup. It was a troublesome dessert to make and unpalatable to boot, with a bittersweet flavor and an astringent aftertaste. Although it was a decent home remedy, there were plenty of medicinal syrups that could serve as a readily available alternative. Since his parents passed away, no one had ever taken the time

and effort to painstakingly stew a bowl of fritillary bulb-stuffed snow pear soup for him.

He sighed. “He Yu…”

“Mm?”

“If only you were a woman. Before…” Before he could finish his sentence, he realized he was out of line. Unable to complete such a dirtbag thought, he abruptly stopped speaking and bent down to take a sip of the pear soup.

He Yu stared at him, stunned. He had an inkling that Xie Qingcheng’s words were worth pondering, but he also just wanted to see his reaction to the soup. Unable to focus on both things at once, for that moment he couldn’t quite make sense of what Xie Qingcheng had been saying. A few seconds later—

“Cough cough cough!”

He Yu jumped at the explosive spate of coughing, completely forgetting what Xie Qingcheng had just said in his panic. “Ge, what’s wrong?”

Face pale, Xie Qingcheng pushed the porcelain cup aside and covered his mouth with his hand. He looked rather like he was about to throw up. Sensing that something had gone wrong, He Yu picked up the porcelain cup and took a sip—

—and spat it right out. The spoon clattered to the ground.

“What the hell! Why is it so salty?!”

It turned out, due to his unfamiliarity with Xie Qingcheng’s kitchen, Young Master He, who had never done a day of work in his life, had mistaken sea salt for rock sugar and stewed a veritable heap of sodium into the snow pear. The resulting soup was completely inedible. His face blanched, then flushed, then blanched again as he trailed after Xie Qingcheng, feeling at once guilty, sulky, and embarrassed.

“Uhh… H-how was I supposed to know that you only had sea salt…”

Xie Qingcheng washed out the pot without a word, then turned around. He Yu backed up a step. He stared at him for a while, before suddenly asking, “Did you have enough for dinner?”

“Yeah…? Huh?”

“If you didn’t, I’ll make you some dumplings. There’s flour and ground meat. It shouldn’t take very long, and I’m done with my work—if you’re not tired, that is.”

It took a while for He Yu to recover from the shock of hearing this. He knew that Xie Qingcheng never wanted to owe anyone anything; since He Yu had made him stewed snow pear, he wanted to repay the favor immediately by making dumplings. He felt a complicated mix of emotions. Despite resisting for a while, in the end he couldn’t help but take two steps forward and wrap his arms around Xie Qingcheng’s slender waist.

“I don’t want dumplings anymore.”

“What do you want, then?”

“I want…I want you to hold me.” He Yu stopped Xie Qingcheng before he could move. “Don’t push me away.”

Xie Qingcheng had no way to respond. The boy was a bit shameless, a bit impudent, but also unwittingly a bit pitiful.

“Xie Qingcheng,” he said. “I just want to hold you for a minute.”

Silence.

“Just for a minute, okay?”

Xie Qingcheng’s hands pressed against He Yu’s shoulders, but in the end, he didn’t push him away. He felt as if his tolerance for him had started to become inappropriate. According to his personal rules for child-rearing, this behavior already constituted coddling. But he no longer knew if he could control himself.

Uncontrollable variables had no place in his life. Xie Qingcheng stood in the kitchen, staring at the image of He Yu embracing him reflected in the windowpane. He rested his weight against the kitchen cabinets, his heart filled with an unprecedented turmoil.

A minute must have passed already. He wanted to push He Yu away, but He Yu tucked his head into the hollow of Xie Qingcheng’s neck and murmured softly, “Ge…what should I do? I can’t live without you anymore.”

Xie Qingcheng remained silent.

“If there comes a day when you’re no longer by my side, I don’t know what I’d become… But as long as I can stay with you, I don’t care if I have to eat frozen dumplings. What I eat, where I sleep, none of it matters as long as we stay together…”

Listening to He Yu confiding in him so sincerely while clinging to him like a spoiled child, Xie Qingcheng felt only more conflicted, as if a snarled up knot was wrapped around his throat, strangling all the things that he wanted to say.

He Yu began visiting Xie Qingcheng’s dorm even more often.

Before, he only came to the medical school after class, but now, he would come over even during his lunch break. Xie Qingcheng ate in the school’s canteen, so he did the same. Gradually, he became less picky about his food, and just like any other ordinary university student, he discovered the joys of junk food.

For instance, the young master would never have set foot at the cheap fried chicken stand by the school’s front gate before—at most, he would have eaten at KFC or McDonald’s. But now, not only did he eat the fried chicken sold at these roadside vendors himself, but he would sometimes even drag Xie Qingcheng along to eat with him. And given his age, Xie Qingcheng wasn’t very fond of deep-fried food.

After being forced by He Yu to eat a Taiwanese fried chicken combo a handful of times, he decided to just return to his dorm at noon and make lunch himself. Naturally, He Yu was happy to comply and followed him home to cop a meal. Before Xie Qingcheng realized that anything had happened, there was already a set of brand new cartoon-themed bowls in his cupboard and an extra pair of cups —one for water, one for coffee, reserved for He Yu—sitting on the table. He picked up the fox-shaped cup with a sigh. After examining it for a while, though, frowning as he did, he nonetheless returned it to its original place.

He could tell that He Yu’s love for him was intensifying. But because He Yu had shed his armor, his heart had also become all the more fragile. In the past, Xie Qingcheng could berate him however he liked; after all, back then He Yu had been so thick-skinned that he would simply ignore whatever he said. But now, with the

boy's heart stripped of all of its defenses and completely at his mercy, Xie Qingcheng had no idea what to do. He had on several occasions wanted to press on He Yu to stay away from him, but whenever the words reached his tongue, he would look into the young man's earnest eyes and find himself bereft of speech.

Xie Qingcheng had always been calm to the point of callousness, but because of He Yu, there were more and more things he no longer had the heart to do. The situation had spiraled out of control. He couldn't force him to give up on his love, nor could he refuse his pleading eyes.

He knew what he had to do.

The following weekend, He Yu came over to Xie Qingcheng's dorm to mooch a meal.

After Xie Qingcheng had finished washing the dishes, he suddenly leaned over to ask him a question. "Xie Qingcheng, are you free tomorrow?"

"Why?"

"I happen to have two tickets to see *Rigoletto*. I don't have anyone to go with me, so if you're interested…"

Xie Qingcheng waited for a moment before responding.

In the past few days, he had made up his mind to have a proper talk with He Yu. They couldn't go on like this. Even if the conversation was terribly cruel, it was like checking for cancer: The earlier it happened, the sooner they could control the spread. He put away all his cleaning supplies, and then he turned back and looked at He Yu for a very long time. The young man's eyes seemed utterly obsessed, and as Xie Qingcheng looked, he suddenly found them terribly precious.

Unfortunately, they both had to return to their senses sooner or later.

"What time tomorrow?" Xie Qingcheng asked at last.

He Yu visibly brightened. "Seven thirty in the evening. If you come, we can have dinner first, and then—"

"Tomorrow night, I'm joining the other professors of my department to give a lecture at another university." Meeting He Yu's suddenly disappointed eyes, Xie Qingcheng continued, "But I should be able to make it if it's at seven thirty. Is it at the Huzhou Grand Theater?"

"Yes." He Yu nodded quickly.

"…All right, I'll come."

He would go out with him one last time. Then, they'd have an honest talk and put an end to He Yu's growing dependence.

Xie Qingcheng knew that he and He Yu had no future together. Age, sexuality, gender, physical condition… There were simply too many barriers between them. Whoever pursued the other would only end up pitted with scars. An obsessive love that persisted no matter the cost was a kind of illness. An operation could be excruciatingly painful, but illness needed to be treated.

As Xie Qingcheng accepted He Yu's invitation, he prepared himself to personally end this relationship that had already veered somewhat out of control.

The next afternoon, though, an unexpected complication arose.

Chapter 150:
Sincere Blessings

THE UNEXPECTED COMPLICATION came in the form of a demand from Commissar Wang.

The treatment for the new variant of RN-13 had gone very smoothly. After taking the antidote developed by the labs at Meiyu Private Hospital, Chen Man and Xie Xue had both been transferred to the general ward and would soon be discharged. But Commissar Wang remained concerned about Chen Man being injected with experimental drugs and was highly skeptical that his grandson had been fully cured. Although he had used his influence to limit the number of people who knew about the drug trials to the bare minimum, he wanted to have samples of the drug sent to scientists in Yanzhou for further analysis. He hoped that Xie Qingcheng and his colleagues could cooperate so he might finally be able to set his mind to rest.

No one dared to refuse Commissar Wang. Even the director of Meiyu Hospital struggled to communicate with him. In the end they had no choice but to make an emergency call requesting that Xie Qingcheng make a trip out to Meiyu Hospital to explain things to Old Mister Wang in person. So Xie Qingcheng went.

"Commissar Wang."

"Take a seat." Commissar Wang offered Xie Qingcheng a seat in the director's office. "Tell me more about this drug. Why can't I bring it to Yanzhou, or even mention it to the researchers working there?"

"From your perspective, this is for the sake of Chen Man's safety," Xie Qingcheng said.

"My grandson was administered an unknown substance. The entire reason I want the researchers in Yanzhou to determine that it won't affect him anymore is because I want to ensure his safety."

"Commissar Wang. I've explained the situation to you—you know that this drug's value for scientific research is immense. This means that there are many out there who, like Huang Zhilong, are willing to resort to desperate tactics to obtain this experimental data. If you inform the researchers in Yanzhou of its existence, how can you guarantee that there won't be another Huang Zhilong among them?"

Displeasure flashed across Commissar Wang's face; the way he saw it, Xie Qingcheng was just an ordinary teacher. "Then why on earth should I trust you?"

"Because my sister was injected with the same drug, and she is the only family I have left."

A brief moment of stunned silence.

"You should understand what I mean," said Xie Qingcheng. "You are the commissar, but you are also Chen Man's grandfather. I am just a teacher, but I am also a girl's elder brother—the only family she has left in this world. I know your love for your family isn't any less than my own." Xie Qingcheng looked at him steadily. "That is why you should trust me, and only me. I will ensure that they are

discharged without a hitch—in fact, that's exactly what's happening."

As the confrontation continued, the head nurse of Meiyu Hospital arrived and delivered Chen Man's latest test results to Commissar Wang.

"How is he?" Commissar Wang asked.

The head nurse regarded him with tremulous respect; most people trembled at the sight of someone of Commissar Wang's stature, and Xie Qingcheng was one of only a few exceptions. "Pl-please set your mind at ease," she said. "His levels have dropped significantly compared to his flare-up and are now approaching normal."

Commissar Wang read through the test results several times.

Finally, he set the document on the desk and turned to Xie Qingcheng. "I'll send my driver to pick you up tonight. I want to ask you about Xiao-Yan's condition and what you encountered at Zhilong Entertainment. Do you understand, Professor Xie? I want to know the truth."

"…I understand."

The staff of Meiyu Hospital broke out into a cold sweat at the prospect of Xie Qingcheng having dinner with Commissar Wang. Fearing that the commissar would put him through a grueling interrogation, the director had half a mind to inform Chen Man, who was still recovering in the general ward. Xie Qingcheng stopped him—partly because Chen Man needed to rest, but also because he knew that getting Chen Man involved would only complicate matters even further. The stakes were too high; there was no way he would tell Commissar Wang the whole truth.

But one had to consider—just what kind of man was Commissar Wang?

What kind of people hadn't the old man encountered? And what kinds of rhetoric hadn't he heard before? Xie Qingcheng knew that, to prevent Commissar Wang from continuing his investigation, he had to thoroughly answer each question with utmost care. But he couldn't tell him what really lay at the heart of the RN-13 case.

It was a long and incredibly arduous meal.

The secretary kept refilling Xie Qingcheng's wine cup in the hope he'd tell the truth if he was drunk—but when Commissar Wang realized he couldn't hold his alcohol, he immediately told his secretary to stop. He had come to ask questions, not to bully a young professor who had no one to rely on. Besides, over the course of their meal, it seemed that Xie Qingcheng had a ready answer for everything. He was neither arrogant nor subservient, and by the end of the night, the sly old fox found himself unexpectedly won over. The young man's explanation seemed airtight as he laid out all of the most vital concerns in unambiguous terms.

As their formal dinner drew to a close, Commissar Wang's expression finally softened.

"I've heard a lot about you," he said, raising his glass. "Xiao-Yan mentions you often. I hope you can understand that I am here today as a grandfather, to ensure the safety of my grandson, not to deliberately make things difficult for you and your colleagues."

Xie Qingcheng lifted his own cup in response. He had already drunk past his limit, his body warm to the touch. But still, he politely returned the toast. He knew the old man wasn't trying to make things difficult for them. When you had the kind of status Commissar Wang did, even the simplest things became complicated. Take

this glass of wine—the commissar obviously meant it as a thank-you and an apology, to express his good intentions, but it would burn uncomfortably as it flowed into Xie Qingcheng's stomach. And Xie Qingcheng had no choice but to drink it.

Finally, arduously, the banquet came to an end.

Commissar Wang was returning to Yanzhou the next day, so once he'd said goodbye to Xie Qingcheng, he got into his car and took his leave. After half a day strung as tight as a wire, Xie Qingcheng was finally able to relax. The back of his shirt was soaked with sweat, hidden from anyone else's eyes. He stood before the big lawn by the restaurant's entrance for a long time, slowly recovering his strength. Like many people in academic or artistic fields, Xie Qingcheng disliked schmoozing; it disturbed the peace his brain cells usually enjoyed.

He watched as Commissar Wang's car drove into the distance, waiting until the taillights had disappeared completely before walking over to the restaurant's koi pond. Lighting a cigarette and staring blankly into the boundless darkness of night, he exhaled a thick puff of smoke. He had been so busy today that he barely had time to breathe. This was the first smoke he'd had all day.

As he lost himself in thought, the ancient clock tower next to the hospital began to toll.

Xie Qingcheng had a lot on his mind, and after so much wine, his thoughts had turned sluggish. He listened in an absent daze at first, but when the bells sounded for the eighth time he started in surprise, realization dawning. He immediately looked down at his wristwatch, his expression shifting slightly. It was nine o'clock…

During his talk with Commissar Wang, Xie Qingcheng had kept his cell phone on silent. Now that he was looking at it, he was shocked to find that it was long past the time he had agreed to meet with He Yu, who had called him numerous times and sent him a dozen messages on WeChat. The last of these was from about half an hour ago. Xie Qingcheng cursed under his breath; he'd completely forgotten about their appointment!

He immediately hailed a car and then quickly called He Yu back.

"Hello. The user you are calling has their device switched off. Please call back later…"

The car arrived, but the call didn't connect. Xie Qingcheng slid sideways into the back seat and slammed the door.

"Where to, sir?" the driver asked.

"Huzhou Grand Theater," said Xie Qingcheng, resting his aching, faintly woozy head in his hand. "Please hurry."

Huzhou was a sprawling metropolis. It took over an hour to get from Meiyu to the theater. Even with the driver flooring it the whole way, it was nearly ten by the time he arrived.

Outside the theater, it was completely deserted. The performance of *Rigoletto* had ended, and the ambient lights outside had all gone dark, leaving only a handful of desolate streetlamps.

It had begun to rain. Xie Qingcheng had borrowed an umbrella from the restaurant earlier, before he climbed into the car. The raindrops struck the umbrella

with a hollow patter as he searched the premises, as he called that unreachable number over and over. But there was no response.

He resorted to leaving voice messages.

“He Yu, where are you?”

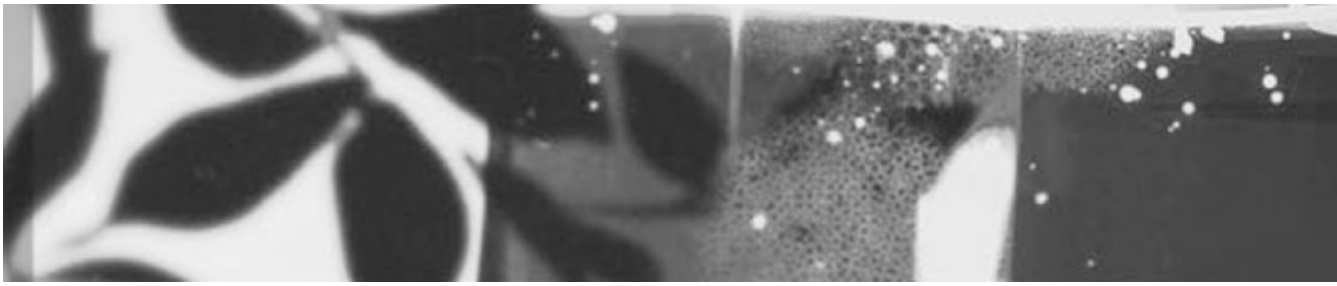
“Once you get this, message me back.”

After a long lap around the theater, Xie Qingcheng finally found the lonely figure at the large fountain by the theater’s northern entrance. He Yu sat on the steps, hugging his knees. The rain had soaked him to the bone, making him look like a large stray dog. Xie Qingcheng breathed a sigh of relief, but also felt a curl of distress. He hurried over to He Yu’s side and held the umbrella over him.

“He Yu.”

The boy started in surprise, then slowly lifted his head.

Xie Qingcheng was shocked—He Yu’s almond eyes were red, and his mouth was stained with blood. Although he had a hand clamped over his wrist, Xie Qingcheng didn’t need to look to know it must be covered in fresh wounds.



When He Yu saw him, his eyes brightened briefly before dimming once more. He bowed his head again, folding his arms to cover his wrists with the palms of his hands.

"What are you doing here?" He turned his head to the side as water droplets slid down his brow. "The opera's over. Everyone's gone."

Xie Qingcheng had no way to respond.

"You should leave too," said He Yu, his voice so calm it sounded broken.

Xie Qingcheng opened and closed his mouth several times, but he had no idea where to begin. It wasn't that he didn't want to comfort He Yu, but he had only ever comforted patients. He didn't have any experience comforting someone who was in unrequited love with him. He mulled over his words for a long time. "Why didn't you answer your phone?" he asked finally.

He Yu said nothing.

Xie Qingcheng reached out to touch his forehead, but just as his palm made contact with searing skin, He Yu slapped his hand aside.

"Don't touch me. Why do you even care? Go back to Chen Man."

"I was with Chen Man because—" Xie Qingcheng stopped abruptly, brow creasing. "How do you know that I was at Meiyu?" Carefully scanning the area, he spotted the shattered remains of a cell phone beside the fountain steps. No wonder He Yu didn't answer his calls.

Composing himself, Xie Qingcheng looked down at He Yu. "You were tracking my location?"

He Yu didn't react at first, his face turned to the side, as if he had no intention to respond. But despite trying to suppress himself, he suddenly broke down, the shattered fragments of his shell that still clung to his body splintering away. He bit down hard on his trembling bottom lip, no longer able to control his emotions. The young man's eyes went from vicious to red, from red to tearful. Finally, those tears overflowed, and a grief-stricken droplet slid down his cheek, all in a matter of seconds.

Xie Qingcheng barely had time to react before he was blindsided by He Yu crying.

"You…"

"You don't have to care about me anymore. There's another RN-13 victim who's more obedient than me, more caring than me, who you have more in common with than me. I'm not the only person who understands you anymore."

Xie Qingcheng stared at him, umbrella in hand; he couldn't make sense of what he was talking about. He Yu was completely distraught, but his distress was laced with viciousness.

"But Xie Qingcheng, if something came up, and you really needed to go take care of him at the hospital, couldn't you have called me first? You knew I was waiting for you here… I've been waiting for you this whole time…"

Xie Qingcheng never could have guessed that this was the reason why He Yu was so hurt. He was an independent and career-focused man who'd never had much of a personal life, and the people in his life all understood this aspect of him very well. Long before they ever got married, even Li Ruoqiu had realized that Xie

Qingcheng wouldn't check his phone or return calls while working overtime. This was the first time anyone had ever thrown a fuss over him not calling about missing a date because he had been attending to a patient. He felt a bit exasperated; at the same time, he also found the experience rather novel.

Only a child would get so hung up on the fact that he had said yes to the invitation. Only a child would refuse to concede no matter what reason he gave for breaking his promise. He Yu was behaving willfully, but tucked within his willfulness was the sort of endearing and impudent quality that was unique to young people. Xie Qingcheng sighed, his furrowed brow smoothing. He reached out to touch He Yu's wet hair, intending to give him a proper explanation of what had happened and tell him that Chen Man had already recovered from his illness—after all, not every single person who took RN-13 would develop psychological Ebola. As he did, though—

Smack!

He Yu slapped his hand aside.

"Don't touch me. As soon as he gets sick, he can call you away and have you stay with him for so long… What were the two of you talking about, Xie Qingcheng? What kind of extensive discussion could you possibly have that would take that long? It's not like you're his personal physician. Even if you know more about RN-13 than the average doctor, and you had to go over to solve a few problems, a couple hours would be more than sufficient, wouldn't it?" He was truly upset; love would cause any young man to lose his composure.

He Yu had always been the picture of calm around Chen Man—only he knew the worries plaguing his own heart. Not only had Chen Man been injected with RN-13, but his elder brother had sacrificed himself while investigating the deaths of Xie Qingcheng's parents. The young police officer had far more bargaining chips to stall Xie Qingcheng's footsteps than He Yu ever had. He Yu had nothing…

Nothing at all.

"Do you have any idea how happy I was when you agreed to come to the opera with me? I was excited the whole day; I was cheerful as I made my way here. I waited for you right here with our tickets in hand. Later, when night fell… When night fell…" He Yu couldn't help choking up as he spoke.

"People entered the theater in twos and threes. The security guard came to ask if I needed help finding the ticket check. I told him, 'No, I'm just waiting for someone.' Later, when it began to rain, he told me to wait inside. The performance had already begun. I told him that you would be arriving soon. I tried to call you, but you wouldn't pick up."

Xie Qingcheng watched his emotions collapse bit by bit like the dry walls of a sandcastle. He tried to interrupt, but He Yu wouldn't listen; he just wanted to finish saying everything he had pent up in his heart.

"Xie Qingcheng, do you have any idea…how scared I was? That I'd just hallucinated all of it?"

He was at a loss for words.

"Did you even notice what day it is?"

He hadn't.

Many adults stopped paying attention to dates as they grew older. Unless there was something that had to be done on a certain day, one was about the same as another. This was the mechanical fashion in which Xie Qingcheng lived his life. Only now did a vague recollection cause him to look down at his cell phone. The date on the screen was May 26th.

He raised his head abruptly. “He Yu, I…”

“After midnight, it’ll be my twentieth birthday.” He Yu lowered his thick lashes. “The Xie Xue that relieved me of my loneliness and the chocolate cake she gave me were both fake. It was also raining heavily that day. I waited in my house until midnight, but all I got was a ridiculous hallucination conjured up by my own mind. Night fell, and I don’t know…I don’t know if you’re fake too.”

He buried his face in his palms, veins bulging on the backs of his hands. His voice was despairing, yet tinged with a hint of madness. He was like a blood-soaked rose—dangerous and terrifying, yet fragile and pitiful.

“I don’t know if you’re fake too!” His voice was choked with sobs. “You never showed up! You didn’t pick up any of my calls… I waited for you, but you never showed up… No one came to find me. No one came to stay with me! I don’t have anything… It’s been twenty years… You have Chen Man, so I’m no longer the only one…and I have nothing! Nothing at all!” His voice was starting to grow hoarse from all this shouting.

He was still wearing the wrist monitor Xie Qingcheng had given him. It had a soothing effect on the wearer and sent alerts when the wearer experienced violent emotional fluctuations. Right now, the sensor light on the monitor had already begun to flash a dangerous red. Xie Qingcheng knew that He Yu was about to lose control. The boy standing before him was like a caged beast, whimpering plaintively. For the first time, he could feel his own chest resonating with the sound of his cries.

“It hurts… It really hurts…” Pressing a hand to his heart, the sick young man, whose senses should have been extremely dulled, said, “Xie Qingcheng…it’s empty in here, but it hurts so much…”

As Xie Qingcheng stared at his crying face, an indescribable feeling unfurled in his heart. He was like a battered little dragon on a jagged rock howling in anguish. A creature on the verge of dying…about to die from grief. A real and actual death by loneliness, death by a broken heart.

He gazed steadily at He Yu. He had no idea how to respond; anything he said would pale in the face of such intense emotion. He walked closer, wanting to press his hand to the invisible injury over He Yu’s heart and staunch the bleeding the way He Yu had done for him on New Year’s Eve. He walked closer…

He wanted to staunch He Yu’s bleeding too.

They both carried old wounds. Deep wounds, penetrating straight into their hearts, unbeknownst to any but themselves. He didn’t understand why He Yu cared so much about Chen Man. Chen Man would always be different from him. To Xie Qingcheng, Chen Man was a younger brother, a friend, and a companion.

What was He Yu? For a moment, Xie Qingcheng found himself struggling to answer.

He had no idea when He Yu had managed to erode his way so deeply into his life. Looking back, the young man had become someone irreplaceable. This realization stunned him—he had never carefully considered who He Yu was to him before. So, who was he? He Yu was the person most similar to him, the person with whom he was the most intimate, the person who knew most of his secrets, and the person with whom he had faced death on countless occasions.

But He Yu was a man.

And he didn't like men. He was heterosexual; he had even been married and divorced before. And Xie Qingcheng knew that he had no need for love in his life regardless. But then, what was such a special and irreplaceable person to him? He didn't know; he felt as though he was trapped in a maze.

It was at this moment that he finally decided to step forward. With his umbrella in one hand, he reached out with his other. He understood the agony suffered only by psychological Ebola patients—something more excruciatingly painful than cancer. Loneliness, isolation, and despair. He finally reached out and pulled He Yu into an embrace. Xie Qingcheng pressed his hands to the dragon's shattered heart, allowing the poisonous blood to spill all over his palms.

Holding him, he said, "He Yu, this is real, not fake. I'm sorry."

Silence.

"I'm sorry for forgetting the date. I…"

Xie Qingcheng had no idea what to say. The older man was as stubborn as he was paternal; he had never even comforted his wife before, much less a young man. All he could do was hold He Yu as the rain continued to patter against his umbrella above their heads and the wind tugged at their clothes. He embraced him tightly as the storm raged on around them, like an azure dragon curling around the fledgling dragon about to die from heartbreak.

He held the young man's trembling body in his arms and said hoarsely, "I'm sorry, He Yu."

No response.

"It's not midnight yet, but I wanted to tell you…happy twentieth birthday."

He Yu quivered sharply—

Happy birthday to you.

"He Yu, happy thirteenth birthday."

The roaring tempest, the flicking candle light, and Xie Xue, holding a birthday cake in her hands and smiling as the grandfather clock struck midnight. *Happy birthday to you… Happy birthday to you…*

He Yu trembled uncontrollably.

It's fake. It's fake…!

There was no one by his side, no cake, and no birthday wishes. He was in a room with countless text messages projected onto the walls, stripping his delusions down to the bare truth. Realizing that everything had merely been a consequence of his pitiful self-esteem providing him a means of self-protection. As if sensing his illness, Xie Qingcheng tightened his arms around him; perhaps in doing so, he could make He Yu hear his beating heart and feel the warmth of his blood.

“I’m here.”

“It’s fake…”

“It’s real, not fake. It’s not an illusion.”

He Yu’s voice had gone hoarse. “It’s fake… It’s fake… Xie Qingcheng never holds me… Even though I beg him again and again to hold me, he never does… He would never… He always refuses…”

He had been hurt too grievously. He had been concealing his wounds with a painted skin, but now he finally bared himself to Xie Qingcheng, revealing the tapestry of blood smeared over his flesh.

“You’re fake! You’re an illusion!”

Grief mixed with madness filled his eyes, and he suddenly knocked Xie Qingcheng’s umbrella away. The rain fell over the both of them like a transparent net, trapping them together. A few beats, seconds, minutes passed, and He Yu still hadn’t awoken from his dream. And Xie Qingcheng hadn’t disappeared either. Gradually, he stopped insisting that it was fake, as if it no longer mattered whether this was real or not.

His violent trembling faded to stillness. Abruptly he threw his arms around Xie Qingcheng, clinging on to him as if he was a piece of driftwood that could save him from drowning. The blinding red glare of his wristband flickered and flickered…before slowly blinking out, like a demon closing its eyes. It reverted back to a warm amber.

He Yu’s tears dripped onto Xie Qingcheng’s shoulder as he clutched at him fiercely, as if he wanted to crush all of his bones and stab their fragments into his own body. He grabbed at Xie Qingcheng’s hand, uncaring whether the umbrella might stay upright or if the two of them would end up drenched. His mind was a tangle of conflicting emotions—menace, passion, perversion, despair, hope, obsession…all of it knotting together.

Without another word, he yanked Xie Qingcheng toward the open-air parking lot behind the theater.

Chapter 151:
The Night of My Twentieth Birthday

HE YU WAS IN a half-crazed state, his mind a hazy fog, but his emotions were as overwhelming as ever.

Perhaps he subconsciously wanted to confirm that Xie Qingcheng was indeed real. Or perhaps he still believed that everything was an illusion and so he could indulge himself guilt-free. Whatever his reasons, he silently dragged Xie Qingcheng to the parking lot. Xie Qingcheng only realized what was happening when they were already halfway there. He tried to break free, but he was still tipsy from the wine and his physical strength had been fading by the day. And ever since the Yi Family Village case, his left arm had never been the same; while he could resist He Yu for a span, he was no match for his strength.

The doors of the Rolls-Royce Cullinan swung open. He Yu gazed down at Xie Qingcheng as he shoved him into the back seat.

"He Yu, you…!"

He Yu said nothing as he clambered in after him, leaving the car door wide open.

Leaning down before Xie Qingcheng could get up, he pressed his arm down on the seat next to the man's pale face. He stared at him for a long, heart-stopping moment before silently shedding a string of tears. Wordlessly weeping, he reached up to slowly stroke his fingers over Xie Qingcheng's face. From the handsome line of his brows, to the bridge of his nose, to his lips, to the sharp curve of his jaw…

Any other time, Xie Qingcheng would have slapped his hand aside. But he saw He Yu's eyes in the ambient light of the car; they were filled with an overwhelming sadness. As he touched Xie Qingcheng's face, his hand was shaking. It was as if he was a blind man, trapped in the darkness and trying to assure himself that there really was someone there beside him. As if by touching Xie Qingcheng like this, he could determine whether the man was real, or simply another hallucination.

Perhaps Xie Qingcheng had drunk too much wine, but his heart trembled violently beneath He Yu's gaze. He'd once thought that the deeply rooted dependence he saw in He Yu's eyes—as if he couldn't live without him—was only a misconception, that he was flattering himself with disgraceful presumptions. But it was all real. He Yu really did love him that much, and he really was irreplaceable to him. But Xie Qingcheng couldn't be with him. There was no way they could end up together.

In fact, he had planned on making this point clear to He Yu after they watched *Rigoletto* today. But now, he found himself unable to speak. He Yu's tears landed on Xie Qingcheng's eyelid and curved down his cheek. He Yu wiped them away.

"Xie Qingcheng…"

He was drowning in despair, and the only hope he could see was the man reflected in his own eyes. If Xie Qingcheng pushed him away…his hope would be

extinguished for good.

"Xie Qingcheng…" He Yu gazed into his eyes as he took Xie Qingcheng's cold hand with trembling fingers. His wristband was orange, indicating that his emotional state was still unstable. As his mood fluctuated, the amber light flashed red intermittently, its presence a pair of handcuffs binding the two of them tightly together until they were thoroughly entangled.

"Xie Qingcheng, I've turned twenty," He Yu said. "I don't know whether you're real or fake, but can you stay with me for a while…?"

He leaned down to catch Xie Qingcheng's lips with his own. His technique left something to be desired, but the passion behind the kiss was intense. Xie Qingcheng could feel the ardor stubbornly and madly burning in his heart, as if it wouldn't be extinguished until he breathed his last, as if his life had been rekindled purely because of this love. The boy pinned him beneath him and sank his fingers into his black hair, holding him and refusing to let him go.

As the kiss went on, Xie Qingcheng began to feel suffocated, his hand going limp in He Yu's grip. The wrist that bore the English epitaph fell down to land on the leather seat cushion.

"Xie Qingcheng, Doctor Xie…don't leave me." As they gasped for breath between kisses, He Yu gazed down and muttered in a low voice like a madman, possessed, "Don't leave me…"

He was rude and unreasonable; yet he was broken and delicate like a shattered glass sculpture, and Xie Qingcheng could clearly see his soul splintering. He suddenly remembered—on New Year's Eve, He Yu had pulled him to his side in his most painful moment. Did he really have the heart to push him into the depths of despair on his twentieth birthday? His heart began to waver.

He Yu murmured a plea for help into his ear. "Xie Qingcheng…can you hold me a little longer? I've held back for so long…I'm about to die from the torment. Xie Qingcheng, please save me… Save me…"

Even if he'd had a heart of stone, there was no way he could say anything cruel to He Yu right now. At his repeated entreaties, Xie Qingcheng's eyes finally softened. He knew that they couldn't be together; that when all was said and done, he couldn't give the boy what he wanted. He knew that soon, he would have to pick up a knife and cut through the tangled mess of threads between them with his own hands. But—

"I love you."

"Loving you hurts, Xie Qingcheng. Loving you hurts so much. I can't have you…and I know that I have to let go, but still…I still love you with each passing day…"

The words of the most ardent confession He Yu had ever given him echoed in his ears. It was a confession that was destined to go unanswered—Xie Qingcheng knew that he would have to leave one day. So…this would be the last time. Before he put an end to this, he would stay with him for his twentieth birthday. The child had spent twenty years of his life in utter isolation. He had never had a proper birthday. Xie Qingcheng didn't have much money and couldn't give He Yu anything in the way of material goods; all he could give—and all that He Yu wanted—was his own body.

I'm sorry, He Yu. I have so little to my name. There is only so much I can give to you. In the end…I can only give you this: this reality on your twentieth birthday to compensate for the illusion of your thirteenth. After this is over…

Xie Qingcheng didn't finish his thought, his chest suddenly throbbing with pain. He looked at He Yu, and when He Yu leaned in to kiss him again, he didn't turn away. The rain grew heavier and heavier as the two of them kissed inside the car.

"Xie Qingcheng," He Yu said, choking on his sobs. "Xie Qingcheng…"

He called his name again and again, his voice so helpless, so heartfelt, so desperate… His words burrowed into Xie Qingcheng's tipsy brain, distilling into a poison that was even more intoxicating than alcohol. As he heard He Yu call out to him, felt those tears landing on his face, Xie Qingcheng was struck by an unprecedented sense of sadness and pity—was he actually drunk? He must be drunk…

"Xie Qingcheng…"

As he called out to him once more in a voice that was nearly a whimper, Xie Qingcheng looped his arms around He Yu's neck and pulled him down. He allowed himself to indulge, kissing that heartbroken and befuddled boy of his own volition. "It's all right," he said hoarsely, "it's all right now, there, there, don't cry."

There was a long, stunned silence. Then, He Yu kissed him back fiercely. Even as tears continued to stream down his face, he moved with such force that the metallic tang of blood flooded their mouths.

"You must be fake…" He murmured. "I'm just hallucinating you… Xie Qingcheng never says these things to me… Not…not ever…"

A touch of madness, stemmed from getting precisely what he wanted, entered He Yu's grief-stricken eyes. Although Xie Qingcheng found the crazed gleam a bit alarming, he had already made up his mind to stop worrying about what might happen tonight. This was the only and final reciprocation he could give He Yu.

"If all this is fake," He Yu mumbled, "then none of this matters… Can you stay with me…? And let me do it with you…?" Xie Qingcheng didn't move away. He Yu pressed another searing kiss to his lips.

In a daze, Xie Qingcheng thought he must have gone insane. How else could he explain why he would willingly do something like this with He Yu, in the middle of an open-air parking lot? It was late at night, and they were parked in a remote spot with no other cars around them, but even so, there was no guarantee that no one would pass by. He Yu didn't even close the door before he started taking off his clothes. He had been repressing this urge for a long time and he was so very impatient. Sick and struggling to differentiate between dream and reality as he was, his movements were unrestrained and rough.

"Wait, close the door first…"

Gripping Xie Qingcheng's jaw, He Yu kissed him again, refusing to give in. "I don't want to. My legs are too long; it'll be too cramped."

Xie Qingcheng was speechless.

He Yu often became harsh when he let himself loose. He also tended toward the adventurous. It made no difference whether he loved his bedmate or not, it was simply the nature of his sexuality. Even if Xie Qingcheng didn't intend to push him

away, their movements still seemed a bit coercive. He Yu was so wild that he found him difficult to bear.

As He Yu passionately kissed him, he began to tug haphazardly at Xie Qingcheng's belt buckle and zipper. Xie Qingcheng's belt was always neatly—even meticulously—buckled. With his inhibitions discarded, He Yu didn't have the patience to properly undo the clasp. In the end, he simply yanked hard, tearing the buckle wide open. Xie Qingcheng cursed quietly at He Yu's violence, but he was roundly ignored as the younger man stripped him of his pants. Too impatient to remove his own underwear, He Yu simply unzipped his own pants to release his furiously swollen cock.

Xie Qingcheng had slept with He Yu countless times, but he still blanched slightly at the sight of that firm, dripping length springing out from its confines. No matter how many times he saw it, he still found it inconceivable that someone could reach such a terrifying size. He Yu then did something that rippled fear throughout Xie Qingcheng—he seemed to have truly lost all sense of reason. He rubbed the wet head of his cock against Xie Qingcheng's opening through the man's underwear, his precome soaking through the black cotton. Every now and then, he pushed inward, forcing his underwear further in until it formed a clear sunken outline.

He moved in vigorous rutting motions against Xie Qingcheng through the thin layer of wet fabric for a long while, the rough cloth heightening the sexual stimulation between them. A restless tingling sensation sent a wave of heat spreading through He Yu's belly. He wished dearly to push right in and indulge in his own pleasure. But when he looked up to see Xie Qingcheng gazing back at him with his peach-blossom eyes, filled with forbearance, he was suddenly seized with the urge to defile this man. Sitting back, he yanked Xie Qingcheng half upright with one hand and used his other to guide his dick to Xie Qingcheng's lips.

College boys these days were all horrible little bastards; given an inch, they would take a mile. He Yu had grown wildly ambitious. He stared at Xie Qingcheng, his black eyes damp, and said hoarsely, "Suck me off."

Xie Qingcheng's heart had softened significantly with He Yu's coaxing, but he never expected the brat to pull a stunt like this. His face turned pale.

"No. Get that out of my face."

He Yu ignored him. His wrist monitor flashed red, his emotional state once again descending into agitated turmoil. He grabbed Xie Qingcheng by his hair and turned his face back around, forcing him to look at his cock before pressing the tip to his cheek and smearing its wetness against his thin lips.

"Why not? This is a hallucination anyway. I'm so hard, it hurts. Suck me… I want you to hold me in your mouth…"

But Xie Qingcheng refused to open up. Unable to coax him through gentler means, He Yu resorted to force. He grabbed Xie Qingcheng by the throat and squeezed, subduing him by partially cutting off his air. He watched with dark eyes as Xie Qingcheng's face flushed until he had no choice but to gasp for breath, then immediately grabbed him by the back of the head and pulled him forward to force his throbbing length into his mouth. He Yu's eyes widened at the electric pleasure and he nearly came right then and there.

"Fuck…" He Yu was always well-mannered in public, but he spewed all sorts of vulgarities in moments like this. He clenched his fingers in Xie Qingcheng's ink-

black hair, veins bulging beneath the skin of his arm. “It’s so good,” he panted.

Xie Qingcheng’s hot, wet mouth felt so incredible around his cock. And if he looked down, he could see the humiliated expression on his face. Xie Qingcheng’s eyes reddened as he choked; he could barely hold such a thick length in his mouth. He looked up at He Yu from under his mussed hair, his gaze disoriented and mortified.

He Yu had never experienced such a feeling of absolute power and conquest. He stared intently at him and gasped softly, hoarsely, “Xie-ge…”

He couldn’t resist thrusting forward into Xie Qingcheng’s mouth as he spoke, tilting his head back in pleasure, his throat bobbing as he swallowed. Usually, He Yu would never have dared to do something so audacious—what if Xie Qingcheng bit him? But he could no longer discern between hallucination and reality. He felt this Xie Qingcheng wouldn’t do that to him, so he dared.

He gripped Xie Qingcheng’s hair tightly, tipping his face upward, and kept thrusting roughly into him. Xie Qingcheng couldn’t speak, his reddened eyes welling with tears as He Yu fucked him in the mouth. It was so uncomfortable that Xie Qingcheng nearly bit down on several occasions, but he knew that he had to resist the urge lest He Yu end up incapacitated. And hadn’t He Yu once given him a blowjob too? He managed to restrain himself from doing something so drastic.

Meanwhile, He Yu was thoroughly enjoying himself. Losing control in his enthusiasm, he accidentally thrust too deep. Xie Qingcheng nearly gagged as the thick cock’s searingly hot head struck the back of his throat. The sudden contraction made He Yu pant, his brow creasing at the stimulation.

“Xie Qingcheng,” he murmured in a throaty voice. “Xie Qingcheng… I love you…I love you so much…”

He pulled his impressively swollen dick from Xie Qingcheng’s mouth. The thick shaft gleamed with moisture, still joined to those thin lips by suggestive threads of silvered wetness. Xie Qingcheng coughed, his face smeared with the same wet substance, but before he could utter any profanities, He Yu leaned down and kissed him once more. As he licked into his mouth, Xie Qingcheng shoved him away.

“Don’t you find this fucking disgusting?!” he snapped.

But He Yu merely grabbed him by the back of his head and dragged him into an ever deeper kiss. He pressed Xie Qingcheng back down against the car seats, wantonly kissing him to his heart’s content as he took off his underwear. There was no lube in the car, but he had placed a box of condoms in the glove compartment some time ago. He tore open a condom and smoothed it on, stroking himself a few times before pressing his cock to Xie Qingcheng’s opening, the lubricant on the condom easing the way inside.

Xie Qingcheng couldn’t help but tense at the intrusion. He dug his fingers into the leather car seats, but found no purchase; he could only bite down hard on his lower lip as He Yu’s enormous, searingly hot cock pushed into him. Just the hardened tip of it was difficult to take, and the feeling of being slowly stretched to his limit and the aching fullness that followed made his slender fingers spasm. But He Yu showed him no mercy. He continued to press his frightfully large dick into Xie Qingcheng’s shuddering channel, forcing the soft clutch of his body open around his length.

Black spots dotted Xie Qingcheng's vision. He Yu's cock was like a blistering, blunt knife cutting through his insides and leaving a mess of bloodied flesh in its wake. But he wasn't the type to say anything; even if it hurt, he was used to enduring in silence.

But it did hurt.

It hurt and it burned.

He Yu was so thick and long that the torturous process seemed to last forever. When he finally bottomed out, Xie Qingcheng breathed out a tremulous sigh—but before he could inhale again, a hoarse scream burst from his throat.

"Ah—!"

He Yu had become so crazy and desperate that he started thrusting at once, striking Xie Qingcheng's most sensitive spot. Xie Qingcheng hadn't expected him to get right to the point like that, but before he could react, He Yu grabbed his shaking hands, pinned him down on the car seats, and began frantically fucking him in earnest.

"Ah… Ahh…"

It was incredibly lewd, without even the slightest preparation. He Yu no longer had the patience for foreplay and instead poured all the longing he had for Xie Qingcheng into immediate and fervent thrusting, as if to forgo fucking him for even a second would be too great a loss to endure. When they'd had sex in the past, Xie Qingcheng would usually have time to mentally prepare himself before He Yu began fucking him, but this time he was completely caught off guard.

It was as if the twenty-year-old boy was desperate to possess the man before him. He was thoroughly acquainted with all of Xie Qingcheng's most sensitive spots, and he began aiming for them the moment he entered, his thrusts quick and powerful. Xie Qingcheng had no time to defend himself against the onslaught as He Yu slammed into his prostate without warning, forcing a shattered cry from his throat. He'd already let out a long moan when he suddenly realized the sounds he was making; he promptly bit down on his lip again, refusing to utter anything further.

But He Yu knew that there was pleasure to be had from hitting that spot, and so immediately began hammering against Xie Qingcheng's prostate.

"Does it feel good? Does it feel good when I push in that spot?" He gripped Xie Qingcheng's hand in his own. Xie Qingcheng refused to make any sound, but He Yu could feel the fine trembling of his fingers. "Does it feel good when I fuck you here?"

Xie Qingcheng withheld his gasps, his brow furrowed deeply. It was hard to put words to what he was feeling, but if pressed, he might call it excruciating agony interspersed with bursts of intense arousal. It was a feeling he'd never experienced before while having sex with He Yu. Aside from that first time at the nightclub, when He Yu hadn't bothered with any foreplay, He Yu would always take the time to prepare him. This was the first time He Yu had ever slammed himself into Xie Qingcheng without warning, aiming for his most vulnerable spot from the get-go.

It was as if He Yu had made up his mind to either go hard or go home. He shoved Xie Qingcheng down, skin slapping against skin as he fucked him hard and fast, before suddenly pulling out his searing length and manhandling Xie

Qingcheng to lie on his side. Sliding his own leg between Xie Qingcheng's slightly spread thighs, he pressed himself against his hole and rubbed the tip lasciviously against the opening a few times before thrusting it back inside.

"Nngh…!"

Xie Qingcheng's inner walls stretched to the limit, soreness interspersed with frissons of pleasure. In this position, He Yu could go even deeper, touching spots that couldn't be reached while he was lying on his back. His prostate was positioned deep, slightly off-center within his body. By fucking him in this position, He Yu could continuously nudge his hot, veiny cock tightly against that very spot. Instead of pulling out, he simply fucked him in shallow but urgent increments.

No matter how tough a man he was, at the end of the day, Xie Qingcheng was still human. With He Yu fucking him this roughly, it didn't take long for his body to surrender. Unable to control his physiological spasms, he began to shiver violently, his breath coming in quick, heavy gasps. But just as Xie Qingcheng's sensitivity began to peak, He Yu did something even more unbearable—as he thrust into him, he reached around, curling his hand around Xie Qingcheng's cock, and began stroking it lewdly.

Assaulted on two fronts, Xie Qingcheng reflexively let out a throaty gasp before immediately smothering the sound into a muffled moan locked in his throat.

"Don't hold back. Scream for me," He Yu coaxed. "Do you have any idea how hot and tight you are back here? And so wet… You're hard in front, too… Xie-ge, it's been a long time since you got off, right? Have you been holding back instead of masturbating? When you're by yourself, do you ever think about how it feels when I fuck you? Do you ever jerk off thinking about us making love?"

"Shut up…"

He Yu turned to press kisses to the mole on the nape of his neck and the line of his jaw before seeking out his lips, again licking into his mouth to entwine their tongues. As he passionately kissed Xie Qingcheng, he continued nudging his hips forward, thrusting without pause. Slowly, Xie Qingcheng's mind began to fog over until finally, his body arched in He Yu's arms.

"Stop," he managed, tortured to the point of grief. "Let go… Stop touching me… Ahh…"

But He Yu could tell that he was about to come; there was no way he was going to listen. He pumped his hand quickly over Xie Qingcheng's wet length, groping him even more fervently.

"Nngh… He Yu… He Yu, let go… Let go… Ahh…!"

With He Yu's cock striking his prostate in the back and his hand toying with him in the front, Xie Qingcheng could endure no longer. After another ten minutes of feverish fucking, Xie Qingcheng's vision whited out as his beautiful length pulsed in He Yu's palm. The older man bit down on his lip, his inner walls clenching as he endured the forced orgasm. He Yu had originally planned on teasing him further, but the sudden contraction around his dick nearly pushed him over the edge.

"Fuck…you're so slutty…" He groaned softly, his breath growing labored. Pulling out his dripping cock, he adjusted their positions slightly as he caught his breath. He grabbed something sitting off to the side, twisted it a few times, and shoved it straight into Xie Qingcheng's sloppy hole—

“Ahh—!” Xie Qingcheng’s eyes flew open. Still in a daze, he twisted back to look, breaking down immediately. “He Yu… He Yu, you fucking…”

He Yu had twisted his underwear into a cloth bundle and stuffed it into Xie Qingcheng’s ass! Fabric was different from flesh. The rough material dragged against Xie Qingcheng’s insides as He Yu fucked it into him repeatedly; all the while, he was still in the middle of his climax.

“He Yu! How could you…!”

He Yu panted into his ear, “You’re about to squeeze me to death—what wouldn’t I dare to do right now? Hm? You’re clinging so tightly down here, Xie-ge. You’re desperate for it too, aren’t you?”

Xie Qingcheng bit down hard on his lip, his peach-blossom eyes red as smudged rouge. He cursed in broken fragments, “Get…get lost…! Pull it out!”

He Yu was fucking defiling him with a wad of underwear; how could he possibly stand it? But He Yu had completely lost his mind today. Even if Xie Qingcheng squeezed him hard enough to take his breath away, he would never have the gall to say that the man’s insides were slutty. He had truly lost all sense of reason. Not only did he ignore Xie Qingcheng’s demands, but he pressed down on the slit at the tip of Xie Qingcheng’s dick, preventing him from coming any further.

With no way to achieve release, Xie Qingcheng was immediately overwhelmed with discomfort. His pale body flushed red as he arched his back against the car seats, his clothes disheveled and his dazed peach-blossom eyes flying open. He Yu continued to thrust the wad of underwear inside his body, causing tears to gather at the corners of his eyes.

“Let go…” he moaned haltingly, agonized beyond description. “Let go… Ahh… Fucking…stop that… Ahh…”

“Well then, what do you want me to do?” He Yu had become completely depraved. Freed from his inhibitions, there were no rules he couldn’t break in bed and no way to reason with him.

“What do you want me to do if not this? Does Gege want to come?” He ran his finger suggestively over the tip of Xie Qingcheng’s cock. Pressing his lips to the base of Xie Qingcheng’s ear, he murmured in a low voice, “Or could it be that Xie-ge doesn’t like this cloth dildo and wants me to stick it in and fuck him properly?”

His words grew softer and softer, as if trying to bewitch Xie Qingcheng. He rubbed his hardness—already wet from fucking Xie Qingcheng before—against the cleft of Xie Qingcheng’s ass. “Do you want it? Can you feel how hot and hard it is? I can make you come again… Just say the word, and I’ll push it in and fuck you hard, all the way to your belly…”

How could Xie Qingcheng possibly stand such coercion? His eyes turned even more crimson with rage. “Fucking…fuck off…!” he hissed, voice shaking.

He Yu’s pupils darkened; Xie Qingcheng’s curses only heightened his arousal. But just as he was about to commit another wicked deed, he was interrupted by distant headlights sweeping over the interior of his car: another car, coming to park nearby! The beam of light cleared the fog in He Yu’s head. He sat up and shut the door behind him. A hush immediately fell over the vehicle, the tinted windows preventing any secrets from spilling out into the open. But before he could breathe a sigh of relief, his vision flashed dark as Xie Qingcheng grabbed him

by the hair and slammed the back of his head against the leather car seat.

"Xie-ge, you—"

Xie Qingcheng was utterly mortified over what He Yu had just done. He was, after all, a divorced man much older than him. Never mind He Yu denying him his orgasm, the fact that the little brat had done something so ridiculous as shove his underwear into him and then attempt to *discipline* him… Given his personality, how could he possibly accept being humiliated in this way? Xie Qingcheng was genuinely incensed. He had no desire to be controlled by anyone. He had already done the damn deed; couldn't he pick a more normal way of doing it?

Did this half-grown brat really think that he was only ever going to be his plaything? Did he really think that he knew nothing, that he was ignorant about kinky sex?!

After imbibing wine, throwing caution to the wind, and making the conscious decision to have sex with He Yu, Xie Qingcheng finally shook off his invisible shackles. The man who had broken free from his chains was extremely aggressive. Even if he was bottoming, he nevertheless exuded an intense pressure when he completely let go in bed. So when He Yu turned to close the car door, he straddled his lap, grabbed him by the hair, and slapped him across the face, eyes blazing fiercely.

"You really are such a fucking…beast in bed! I pity the poor girl who ends up with you in the future!"

Whenever the two of them had sex, no matter how tenderly they held each other at first, it always devolved into sharp words and violent fucking.

The slap left He Yu momentarily stunned, but he quickly recovered his senses. Tilting his head back, he slid his hands under Xie Qingcheng's gaping shirt and stroked over his waist. "Mm," he murmured, voice hoarse. "In that case, to save these girls from suffering, why don't you stage a heroic rescue and keep playing with me so they don't have to?"

Xie Qingcheng slapped him again.

And frankly speaking, two slaps weren't enough to vent all of his anger. He Yu's bedroom behavior tonight had been appalling. What the hell did he think he was doing? What kind of play was this? Just because he'd turned twenty, he thought he'd seek out some new thrills?

"Shut up and sit still," Xie Qingcheng hissed. "Do you really think I'm a woman? That I'll let you do whatever you want? Do you really fucking think that I don't know how to do anything?"

He gazed down at He Yu, sitting astride his lap. He Yu had genuinely planned on spending his twentieth birthday with Xie Qingcheng, so he had gone out of his way to dress somewhat formally, with a youthful yet smart tie. His collar had been loosened already, but his tie was still fastened around his neck. Xie Qingcheng pulled on He Yu's tie with slender fingers, guiding him till he was pinned to the back of the seat. With his back slightly arched and his red-rimmed eyes glaring fiercely at the young man beneath him, he gritted his teeth and slowly began to pull out the fabric that He Yu had shoved into him.

The obscene squelch could be heard clearly in the silence of the car. He Yu's breath roughened as he watched, his eyes dyed red with desire.

He couldn't resist reaching out to touch Xie Qingcheng. "Xie-ge…"

Xie Qingcheng yanked hard on his tie, stopping him. "I told you to sit still."

Removing the underwear was a humiliating and torturous affair. The fabric was so rough that he couldn't help but shiver whenever it rubbed against his inner walls. When he finally managed to pull the whole thing out, Xie Qingcheng gasped, feeling a bit weak in the legs.

He flung the garment aside, then turned to meet He Yu's darkening eyes. Apparently, He Yu had found his handling of the fabric dildo to be incredibly arousing. His breathing grew heavier and heavier as he groped roughly at Xie Qingcheng's waist beneath his shirt, groaning through his nose, filled with the urge to shove Xie Qingcheng down and fuck him.

But Xie Qingcheng pushed back with his arm, pinning him in place. "Sit!" he ordered, brooking no refusal. His peach-flower eyes were vicious; the words strained out between clenched teeth. "I said, sit!"

He Yu's throat bobbed. "Xie Qingcheng, just what exactly are you doing…?"

Xie Qingcheng leaned in slightly, his beautiful eyes like colored glass in the lamplight spilling through the window. As he forced his will on He Yu, he revealed a beautiful fragility, one that was not at all at odds with his strength.

"What, you think just because you've grown a year older, you can treat me like this? Do you really think that I don't know how to play?"

Xie Qingcheng slid his hand down as he spoke, grabbing He Yu's dick and pressing it to his own entrance. Then, with his brows furrowed, he rocked his hips down, enduring the pain as he impaled himself on He Yu's searing length bit by bit.

"Xie-ge, you—!"

Gripping He Yu's tie with his other hand, Xie Qingcheng looked unspeakably sexy as he took hold of He Yu's cock and fed it into himself. Even with Xie Qingcheng aggressively disciplining him, He Yu was still incredibly turned on. When he was fully seated, He Yu couldn't resist throwing his head back, letting out a low, husky gasp. His dick was wrapped tightly in Xie Qingcheng's soft warmth, the sensitive channel sucking at him rhythmically. So stimulating, and so intensely pleasurable…

He Yu wrapped his arms around Xie Qingcheng's waist and leaned back against the car seat, his almond eyes misting over as he stared at the man sitting in his lap. His roaming hands had left Xie Qingcheng's shirt gaping open, the snowy white fabric dangling from his elbows like a half-opened lotus. The man's handsome face seemed to declare, "No matter what, I'm the daddy in this relationship," as he sought to maintain control in bed.

Before he had sex with He Yu, Xie Qingcheng had been a completely straight man. He had no interest in fucking men, much less men younger than himself—just the thought of it would have made him frown in distaste. Even though he was a man through and through, in his sexual activities with He Yu, he had no desire to do the fucking. When he got in bed with him it had always been to satisfy the kid's lust, not his own; he was just performing an act of charity.

That was precisely why, even when this daddy dom sought control, he never considered turning the tables. It wasn't as if he needed to be the one doing the penetrating to prove that he was a man. After all, wasn't He Yu the one currently

gasping for breath?

Xie Qingcheng kneeled in the spacious back seat of the Rolls-Royce Cullinan. He was tall enough that he had to bow his head to avoid bumping into the ceiling of the car's cabin—and just like that, he pinned the freshly twenty He Yu against the back of the seat and began to ride him. He Yu was immediately overwhelmed, so aroused that the wrist monitor flashed red at once. But the alert wasn't dangerous, the red light merely a sign of his sexual excitement.

He Yu wanted to fuck up into him, but Xie Qingcheng yanked on his tie with a stony expression. "Stay still, or else."

"Xie-ge…" He Yu whined softly.

Xie Qingcheng bit his lower lip and continued riding He Yu in silence, allowing his cock to rock slowly into his body.

"Ge…" Overwhelmed with frustration, He Yu could only tilt his head back and endure the exquisite sensation of Xie Qingcheng squeezing around him as he moved up and down in his lap. It felt so good, his scalp prickled with pleasure, but with Xie Qingcheng moving so slowly, it did nothing to quench his thirst. He Yu was about to go insane with the urge to slam into him, but he could only endure as Xie Qingcheng held him fast and continued to ride him.

"Ge…" he gasped, on the verge of tears. "Go faster… Ride…ride me harder…"

After rolling his hips for a while, Xie Qingcheng paused to catch his breath. He loosened his grip to adjust He Yu's tie before wrapping his arms around his neck, shifting his lower body minutely. Although he permitted He Yu to sob into his embrace, he fiercely stifled his own reactions. He sank all the way down onto his cock each time, allowing him to fuck him deeply but slowly.

He Yu couldn't bear it anymore. Turning his head, he pressed his mouth to Xie Qingcheng's chest in an effort to quench his thirst. He held his pale nipple between his lips, kissing and sucking at it as he stroked his hands over Xie Qingcheng's waist. His wicked thoughts from moments ago had completely evaporated as he endured Xie Qingcheng's assault, and he could only sob, "Ge…I want to fuck you…"

"Isn't that what you're doing right fucking now?"

"I want to fuck you faster. This isn't enough…"

"Where are all these demands coming from?"

"But it's my birthday…" He gently bit down on Xie Qingcheng's nipple as he spoke, eliciting a shiver. Gazing up at him, He Yu was so upset he was on the verge of tears. "Ge, I can't stand it anymore… You're squeezing me so tight… I was wrong… Don't punish me anymore…"

"Tell me, what did you do wrong?"

He Yu couldn't resist thrusting in tandem with Xie Qingcheng's movements as he stared intently into his eyes. He swallowed, and said in an obscene whisper, "I shouldn't have looked down on Gege…and I shouldn't have bullied Gege like that…" As Xie Qingcheng ground down into his lap again, He Yu's willpower splintered. Brow twisted in frustration, he gasped, "Ge…you're so hot inside…and so tight… I can't stand it anymore… I really can't…"

Without being allowed what he wanted down below, he leaned closer and began sucking and nibbling at Xie Qingcheng's nipple. He lapped at the nub of flesh with his pink tongue, nuzzling it with his nose.

"Ge…I want to feel good… Can't you indulge me a little?" The boy couldn't help but push up into him, his voice tinged with a whimper.

To be honest, this kind of slow and steady fucking wasn't particularly comfortable for Xie Qingcheng either. Now that He Yu had submitted, he shifted so that he was kneeling on the car seat. With a rough moan, he slowly lifted up till only half of He Yu's dick remained sheathed inside him. Then he leaned down, stroking his fingers over He Yu's sweat-soaked brow.

"You want it?" the man asked, as he gazed down at He Yu with dark, sultry eyes.

"Mm."

"Then do it yourself. Put your back into it and make it good, or I'm ending this."

He Yu's eyes lit up at once. There was no way he was holding back, much less failing to make it good. He immediately wrapped his arms around Xie Qingcheng's slender waist, dragging him down as he slammed his cock into him with guided precision.

"Ahh…!"

After resisting for so long, both men couldn't help but cry out as they finally joined in carnal pleasure. Xie Qingcheng's legs nearly went limp as He Yu drove in deep and hard, nailing his prostate and causing the wetness that had gathered inside his hole during the slow and teasing grind to splatter out. He Yu tightened his grip as he began thrusting like crazy.

Xie Qingcheng's eyes glazed over as he choked out a mouthful of oaths, but in the end, he furrowed his brow and forced himself to adjust, standing fast in the face of He Yu's frenetic pounding and refusing to give in. He rocked his hips in tandem with He Yu's thrusts, allowing the boy's cock to plunge even deeper into his body. "This is all you've got?" he asked, unyielding. "And yet you still try to provoke me?"

He Yu looked up at the man in his arms. Xie Qingcheng's waist had clearly gone slack, but still he was unyielding. Sinking into him again, he panted, "In that case, I'll make sure to satisfy Xie-ge."

Xie Qingcheng really was just asking for it. His skin had become flushed, hot to the touch from being fucked, yet he insisted on acting as if he was in control. To the point of still providing He Yu paternalistic counsel. "Faster," he gasped hoarsely. "That spot there… Do you know how to fuck or not? …Ahh…!"

He suffered shameful consequences for his sharp tongue. Clutching his waist, He Yu slammed into him as if he wanted to humiliate him, as if he wanted to shove his balls in alongside his cock. He was a sneaky bastard: He had gotten precisely what he wanted, yet he was the picture of innocence as he clung to Xie Qingcheng and murmured, "How about this? I don't understand… Ge, ride me harder… It feels best when Gege rides me on his own."

Xie Qingcheng had truly dug himself into a hole, but he couldn't let He Yu's words go unanswered. Shaking with pleasure, he rallied himself and continued

meeting He Yu's thrusts with sharp movements of his own. The heavy SUV rocked to the rhythmic slap of colliding bodies as He Yu clutched at the sweat-soaked man shivering in his arms and moaned with relish. The strength of Xie Qingcheng's waist as he rolled his hips and took He Yu all the way in was a marvel. He Yu's eyes filled with lust, his arousal flaring as he gazed ardently up at Xie Qingcheng's restrained expression.

The deeper they sank into desire, the more unbridled their movements became. He Yu bottomed out with Xie Qingcheng's every rise and fall, reaching terrifying depths within the man's body and unleashing an incredible wave of pleasure. Sticky wetness leaked incessantly from Xie Qingcheng's ass only to be shoved back inside, their coupling becoming feverish as their rocking movements grew faster and faster.

Slap, slap, slap…

The smack of skin on skin was particularly loud in this position, and the condom on He Yu's dick nearly slid off with how hard they fucked. All inhibitions faded away as they lost themselves in each other. Xie Qingcheng looped his arms around He Yu's neck and He Yu wrapped his hands around his waist as they joined together stickily, fervently down below. They didn't kiss at first, simply staring into each other's eyes. But as their fucking progressed, they moved closer and closer, as if drawn by some invisible magnetic force, until their lips and tongues finally met in a messy tangle.

It was raining outside, and the car window was open a sliver, allowing a chill to drift in with the night wind, yet they were both drenched in sweat. Their tacky skin stuck together, and it seemed as if their bodies would merge into one. Such a stimulating experience seemed to defy all logic. As they gradually lost control, Xie Qingcheng sank down to the hilt, grinding sultrily against He Yu's lap, while He Yu thrust up, entering fast and hard.

Xie Qingcheng's arousal, which he had kept dampened before, slowly began to rise again. His handsome face was dripping with sweat; even his lashes were wet. Being fucked for so long had already left him somewhat overwhelmed. As He Yu continued to hammer his prostate, his waist began to soften. His legs rested weakly at He Yu's sides as he leaned his body against him, trying to keep himself from collapsing entirely. The hands clinging to He Yu's back slowly tightened into fists.

Realizing that Xie Qingcheng was about to come, He Yu abruptly changed positions. He picked Xie Qingcheng up and pushed him back down on the car seats. Lifting one of his legs, He Yu proceeded to throw his all into hitting all of his most sensitive spots, as if hell bent on ravishing him to death.

"Ahh…ahhh…" It was too much—Xie Qingcheng couldn't help screaming as He Yu fucked him roughly through his shuddering orgasm. "Ahh… He Yu… Slow… Ahh… Ahhh…! Not there… I can't take it… It…it feels weird… Ahh… Ahhh…"

His body spasmed as he climaxed again, releasing even more come than before. For a terrifying second, Xie Qingcheng thought that he really was going to be fucked to death, as if his soul would scatter from the sheer force of He Yu's thrusts. He really was about to go mad…

He Yu's throat bobbed, pleasure coursing through him as he relished the feeling of Xie Qingcheng's inner walls clamping down on his cock in orgasm. Gripping Xie Qingcheng by the waist, he immediately slammed back into him, even

as veins bulged from the backs of his hands like venomous snakes from the rapturous sensation. Panting softly, He Yu fucked him through his afterglow, driving Xie Qingcheng to the edge of insanity as he released spurt after spurt of come, disgracefully staining He Yu's hand and the car seats.

He Yu murmured, "Ge, are you satisfied? You've come so much. Does it really feel that good? Hm? Does it really feel that good when I fuck you?"

An orgasm was intensely pleasurable to begin with, much less an orgasm with He Yu mercilessly abusing his prostate in this most intimate way. Xie Qingcheng shouted incoherently, his mind a muddled blur. Vaguely, he registered He Yu pushing inside and fucking him for a while longer before pulling out and manhandling him, He Yu's chest now plastered against his back.

"Nngh…"

Xie Qingcheng moaned involuntarily as he pulled out, his low-pitched voice hoarse and mature…yet wanton and soft. He lay limply against the seat cushions, eyes unfocused. His hole had become a sticky mess; the condom had served its lubricating purpose, so He Yu took it off and tossed it aside.

"You're so wet inside, Ge—I don't need the condom anymore. I'm fucking you raw." He pressed his cock to Xie Qingcheng's opening, slowly sliding back inside. Extra sensitive in the aftermath of his orgasm, his passage swallowed greedily around the intrusion, as if eager to please another. Hissing with pleasure, He Yu brought his hand down with a firm slap on the callipygian curve of Xie Qingcheng's ass.

"It feels better for you this way too, right?" he asked huskily. "You're sucking me in even more tightly than before… You're going to make me come if you keep that up…" He Yu began thrusting wildly the moment he pushed in, causing Xie Qingcheng's legs to shiver with each drive inward.

"Ahh…" Xie Qingcheng shuddered violently, dragged back to his senses by He Yu fucking him roughly, pain and pleasure combining in the aftermath of his previous orgasm into a vicious wave of ecstasy. "He Yu… Ahh… That's enough… I don't want it anymore… I can't take it… Ahhh…!"

"Enough? Don't be ridiculous—I haven't let Gege eat his fill yet…"

He Yu continued to embrace him, to kiss him, to fuck him, building up to a final burst of strength amid Xie Qingcheng's distressed cries. The car shook violently; if anyone walked by, they'd be bound to notice their frantic love-making. He Yu pumped hard and fast, slamming into Xie Qingcheng's prostate again and again. He could feel Xie Qingcheng instinctively trying to break free. After all, as a man—and a very straight man at that—he was naturally resistant to, and terrified of, another man coming inside him.

"Don't… He Yu… I don't want it… Don't come… I'm begging you… Please… Ahh…" Xie Qingcheng began to struggle in vain, jerking forward in an attempt to break free, his beautiful, slender fingers spasming as they dug into the filthy, come-stained leather seats. For the first time, the man's voice took on a plaintive quality as he begged, "Don't… Don't come inside… There's no way to clean it up… I still have to go home… Ahh… Ahhh!"

He Yu responded by fucking him even harder. He pinned Xie Qingcheng down by the wrists, holding him firmly in place, as if he was subduing a powerfully stubborn mare that was refusing his seed. After a final few thrusts, his cock

throbbed. Overwhelmed with intense pleasure, He Yu shouted as he shot pulse after pulse of warm, viscous fluid inside Xie Qingcheng, coating his twitching prostate with spend.

Xie Qingcheng trembled violently, tears streaming down his face, but the thick come paid no mind to his resistance and shame as it poured relentlessly into his quivering ass. His eyes glazed over, his aching body going limp as he was forced to accept the boy's offering.

"Ahh…"

"Ge, are you trying to seduce me, moaning like that? Are you trying to make me come even more?" He Yu bit down on Xie Qingcheng's neck as he emptied himself into the older man. "You know perfectly well that there's no point in screaming, yet you insist on tempting me. Is it because you want me to fuck you even harder? You want to go home filled up with my come?" He kept shoving his hips forward, forcing himself even deeper into Xie Qingcheng's sopping hole.

Xie Qingcheng was practically sobbing. He wanted to curse He Yu out, but his lips were trembling too badly, and his eyes struggled to gather focus. Wave after wave of tremors racked his body, each fresh gush of come pumped into him prompting an involuntary shudder. His lashes were clumped with tears, an automatic physiological reaction to the intense pleasure and humiliation.

"No… Stop… Stop coming… He Yu…" His damp eyes shimmered like pearls as He Yu's seed slowly dribbled from his opening. "I feel so full…" he sobbed. "It's too much…"

He Yu smoothed his hand over Xie Qingcheng's flat belly, smearing it with Xie Qingcheng's own come.

"Ge, I wish…that the first thing I see every morning is you lying next to me, with come dripping from your hole… You're mine… You can only be mine… Ge… Xie-ge… I love you… I love you so much…" He Yu kept touching him even after he finished coming, from his waist and abdomen all the way to his face. He buried his own face in the hollow of Xie Qingcheng's throat. His expression was soft. "Don't leave tonight, okay?" he murmured.

There was no response.

"Stay with me tonight, okay?"

Xie Qingcheng didn't have the strength to speak. His ass clenched around He Yu's cock. Since He Yu had forgone using a condom, Xie Qingcheng's inner walls were completely soaked. He couldn't help but whimper when He Yu pulled out, lifting a hand to cover his eyes. Sticky white spend oozed from his opening as his fucked-out hole twitched and shuddered, as if reluctant to let He Yu's cock go. But Xie Qingcheng was a cold and unyielding man first and foremost. His shattered dignity was far more erotic than the surrender of someone with a gentler disposition.

By now, He Yu's head had long since cleared.

He already realized that the person with whom he had entangled for half the night wasn't a hallucination—that it really was Xie Qingcheng. Xie Qingcheng who had comforted him; Xie Qingcheng who had stayed with him. It was Xie Qingcheng who had chosen not to leave in the end, who had used his flesh and blood body to offer warmth and desire, soothe his pain and combat the illness residing inside his heart.

He Yu's hands shook as he ran his fingers gently over Xie Qingcheng's face with infinite tenderness and yearning. This was different from the Xie Xue who had visited him on his thirteenth birthday. This Xie Qingcheng was real. As the two of them basked in the afterglow of their intense passion, the clock tower atop the theater tolled once—twice—three times—

It was midnight. Countless memories surged forth with each resonant strike of the bell, burying the sound of the grandfather clock in that big empty house like a fall of snow. The boy stared at Xie Qingcheng, at the tender reality that he had awaited for twenty years, tears once again rolling down his cheeks and dripping onto Xie Qingcheng's face. Xie Qingcheng was feeling rather tetchy after being fucked by the little brat; he had half a mind to slap him, but as he reached out to do just that, He Yu suddenly began to cry. He dropped his hand. He didn't have the heart to strike someone who was crying.

"You…" he managed after a speechless moment. "What's wrong with you now?"

He Yu threw his arms around him.

The evil dragon felt as if something was about to spill over in his heart. After hugging him for a while, he pressed Xie Qingcheng back into the seat cushions, sweat slick between their bodies. He Yu gazed steadily into his damp eyes.

"Xie-ge, did you know? In twenty years, this is the first time someone has ever celebrated my birthday with me. Thank you. I love you."

The boy's feelings were too profound. Xie Qingcheng's mind was still a bit sluggish from the sheer intensity of the passion he'd just endured, and for a moment he had no idea how to respond. Whether scolding him or reciprocating his feelings, both options seemed wrong.

Xie Qingcheng leaned back weakly against the car seat. The scene of their debauchery, the leather upholstery, had become unspeakably wet and sticky. He was utterly exhausted and had no idea what to say; he kept his silence, eyes dazed as he allowed He Yu to kiss his lips, his nose, his earlobe, down to his neck. But He Yu's ardor ran deeper than Xie Qingcheng expected. Now that he'd experienced the pinnacle of pleasure, He Yu didn't want to hold back anymore. Slicking his hardening cock with his own come, he pressed himself to Xie Qingcheng's entrance and shoved in before the man could react.

"Ahh!" Xie Qingcheng cried out hoarsely as He Yu pressed him back into his seat.

The second round was even cruder than the first. The Rolls-Royce Cullinan rocked violently as He Yu forced Xie Qingcheng's legs wide open and fucked in. With each thrust, the place where one body melted into the other became stickier and stickier. This time, the car shook for nearly an hour before He Yu reached his second orgasm, emptying himself completely inside Xie Qingcheng.

Xie Qingcheng couldn't bear it any longer. After the second round, he didn't even have the strength to stand. He Yu kissed him as he lewdly fingered his hole.

"Ge… You're so wet inside… It's all because of me… Say, do you think you'll get pregnant with my child if you stay like this…?"

"Fuck off…" he said faintly.

He Yu smiled. He rubbed his hands repeatedly over the flat plane of Xie Qingcheng's abdomen, kissing him again and again. "Let me take you to my house; it's close by. I can give you a bath and help you clean up…"

Xie Qingcheng picked up a bottle of mineral water and smacked it against He Yu's head, cutting off his prattle. "Seriously, fuck off."

There was a difference between the kind of "fuck off" Xie Qingcheng said with categorical finality and the kind of "fuck off" he said when he just couldn't be bothered to engage in someone else's nonsense. He Yu had been cursed out by him so many times that he had long since grasped the distinction in his tone of voice: This particular "fuck off" was a case of the latter.

His magnetic voice was tinged with lethargy. He Yu's smile softened even further. At some point, his wrist monitor had switched to an aqua blue—an indication of his tranquil mood. He covered Xie Qingcheng with his shirt, then leaned in for another kiss. Xie Qingcheng pulled the shirt off in irritation; He Yu draped it over him again.

"Ge, careful you don't catch a cold," he coaxed gently as he nuzzled Xie Qingcheng's nose. "I'll drive."

Xie Qingcheng was truly exhausted. He had nowhere to go; at this point, with how sticky and filthy he was, he couldn't even get out of the car. He Yu knew that Xie Qingcheng couldn't bear to be seen right now, so he drove them directly to his family residence's underground parking garage. From there, he took a private route through his personal elevator, which was monitored by surveillance cameras completely under his control. Without He Yu's password, no one would be able to access this footage.

Now that he was at home, He Yu shed the last shreds of his restraint. He began stripping Xie Qingcheng of the clothes he had only just put on in the elevator, as if something terrible might happen if he remained clothed for a second longer. The moment they entered his bedroom, he pinned him to the door, turning the lock with one hand and kneading Xie Qingcheng's pert ass with the other. He unzipped his pants, pulled out his throbbing length, and entered Xie Qingcheng's unbearably sloppy and fucked-out hole once more, ignoring the resistance as he practically assaulted the man.

"Nngh…" Xie Qingcheng's brow twisted.

He broke down a little. He'd never expected things to go like this. He'd barely had the chance to catch his breath before He Yu had dragged him to his house. He Yu had evidently forgotten all about the idea of letting Xie Qingcheng take a bath; the moment the doors closed, they were back to fucking like crazy in his bedroom.

"Ge…" He Yu pressed Xie Qingcheng's back against the door and pounded into him several dozen times, relishing the feeling of Xie Qingcheng's narrow passage twitching lasciviously around him. "Ge," he gasped, once his thirst was quenched somewhat, "I regret falling in love with you so late… If I'd fallen for you sooner, I could have locked you in my bedroom and fucked you back when I was still in middle school. I would have made you teach me how to make love… How to make you feel good, how to make me feel good…"

He Yu rammed into the sweat-soaked man in his arms, whispering all manner of filth into his ears, but he could hardly be faulted for acting like a beast when Xie

Qingcheng was so gorgeous. Right now, with his hazy peach-blossom eyes, his damp lashes that quivered with each of He Yu's violent thrusts, and his naked chest covered in He Yu's kisses and bites, there was a fragile quality to his beauty. But at the same time, he was still so formidable. Even like this, already so utterly defiled, he still bit his pale lips bloody rather than let out a sound.

Pinning Xie Qingcheng against the door, He Yu kept slamming into the hot, wet clutch of his body, making the wooden panels rattle. He tugged at Xie Qingcheng's lapels, dragging his shirt off his shoulders before leaning down and sucking one of his nipples into his mouth. Xie Qingcheng couldn't help but shiver at the wicked stimulation, his eyebrows drawing together in a grimace. He Yu lapped at Xie Qingcheng's chest, hugging him close and wrapping his slender legs around his waist before plunging back into his tight opening.

Xie Qingcheng had already been left soaking by He Yu coming inside him earlier. The wet squelch of their coupling sounded even lewder than before, the slap of skin on skin ringing out with each of He Yu's thrusts as come and slick dripped onto the floor. He Yu gazed down at the white froth spilling from Xie Qingcheng's shuddering hole as it swallowed his thick, ruddy cock—the consequence of their prolonged fucking. His eyes reddened as he stared, his breath thickening to rough panting. He grabbed the arm that Xie Qingcheng had wrapped around his neck and tried to bring his hand down to the place where they were connected.

"Ge, look, it's all wet down here… I've opened you all the way up, but you're still sucking at me so hard… You feel so good…"

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes, refusing to touch it. He didn't even want to loosen his grip; with one of his arms incapacitated, if he were to let go of He Yu's neck now, the only thing keeping him upright would be He Yu holding him up as he fucked him, and the idea of feeling so out of control terrified him. He didn't want to show it, but his trembling lashes betrayed these emotions. He Yu embraced him tightly, soothing him with kiss after kiss, their lips and tongues entangling as their bodies pressed intimately together.

He Yu comforted him with kisses as he yanked his shaking hand down to the place where he was plowing into the other man's body. "Feel that?" he murmured. "I'm fucking you, Xie Qingcheng… I'm the only one who's allowed to fuck you…"

Xie Qingcheng's ears reddened as he struggled to pull his hand out of He Yu's grip. "…You…shameless bastard!"

"Then won't the good doctor teach me shame?" He Yu asked, slowly pulling out. He rubbed the tip of his cock teasingly, lasciviously against the cleft of Xie Qingcheng's ass until he began to quiver, then plunged back into his fucked-out and gaping hole.

"Ahh!" Xie Qingcheng jolted against the door, his legs spasming around He Yu's waist.

He Yu pressed a kiss to his chest, then lifted his head to catch Xie Qingcheng's lips with his own. He hoisted the man higher and said gently, "Ge, hold on tight."

Before Xie Qingcheng could react, He Yu carried him over to the large bed with his dick still buried in his ass. It was far too erotic; Xie Qingcheng could feel He Yu's cock throbbing inside him, jostling deeper and deeper with each step taken. It was a spine-tingling kind of terror beyond his wildest imagination.

It wasn't that far to the bed, but it still took a number of steps to span the distance. As He Yu held Xie Qingcheng in his arms, still thrusting into him, he could feel him tensing with panic at losing his final point of leverage. Xie Qingcheng's lovely, incisive eyes glistened in the dim glow of the night light, their rims turned scarlet from how hard he'd been fucked. At that moment, his handsome face seemed incomparably beautiful to He Yu.

He stared down at Xie Qingcheng for a few brief beats. Then, unable to bear it anymore, he pressed the man down against his wide, spacious bed. The impact drove He Yu even deeper than before, as if he was trying to shove his balls in along with his cock. The overwhelming sensation punched a scream out of Xie Qingcheng, his voice torn between agony and delight. A wave of heat sizzled through He Yu's abdomen, electrifying his tailbone as his body went numb with pleasure.

"Fucking hell, you're such a tease…" He Yu's bedroom behavior was atrocious—he always talked filth when he was aroused—but he loved Xie Qingcheng, so after spewing such vulgarities, he would always solicitously kiss him again to soothe him.

Consequently, Xie Qingcheng could neither curse him out nor fly into a rage; He Yu just pinned him down on the bed and enthusiastically began fucking him again. He Yu's bed was soft and springy, and the mattress shook from their frantic movements. Xie Qingcheng's pale pink toes curled as his legs were forced wide open, his hands digging into the bedding, his breaths coming in rapid bursts.

The bedroom filled with deep moans and the squeak of springs. Wetness dribbled down from the place where their bodies melded together, drenching the sheets.

A thought came to He Yu as he was immersed in pleasure. He grabbed one of the fabric tie-backs of his bed curtains and used it to blindfold Xie Qingcheng. Kissing him, eyes dark, he panted softly, "Ge, I want to try something a little more exciting with you."

"What the fuck are you doing *now*?!" Xie Qingcheng's voice took on a note of panic; how was he supposed to know what counted as "exciting" to this animal?! He couldn't see what He Yu was doing anymore. Deprived of his sight, Xie Qingcheng could feel each of He Yu's thrusts even more intensely than before; it was a hair-raising sensation.

"He Yu, you… Ahh…"

He Yu slowly ground into him with a lewd swivel of the hips. "Ge, imagine that you're still working at my house as my personal doctor."

Xie Qingcheng bit down on a retort.

"Pretend I've just barely hit puberty—that I'm in high school. I don't know anything. You call me to this room and say you're going to teach me…"

Was this brat He Yu trying to fucking roleplay with him?! Xie Qingcheng was so angry he could spit blood. "I'd make you figure it out your fucking self!"

He Yu ignored him, smoothing his hands over the taut lines of Xie Qingcheng's body and staring deeply into his covered eyes as if he might erotically hypnotize him even through the blindfold. "You take me into your bedroom and lock the door. You tell me that this is normal and give me a sex ed lesson…but I

don't understand… I'm captivated by your beauty…and get hard in response…"

He slowly caressed Xie Qingcheng's face, running his fingers over his trembling lips beneath the strip of fabric before bending to press a lingering kiss to his mouth.

"So I invite you onto the bed and ask you to teach me personally…"

Xie Qingcheng knew that married couples sometimes engaged in kinky roleplay during sex; but the scenario He Yu was describing was too obscene. What kind of messed up script would start with a personal doctor giving his employer's son a biology lesson and end with the two of them rolling into bed together?

"Is this the kind of nonsense you study for your directing degree?" Xie Qingcheng demanded, his voice hoarse.

He Yu paid him no mind. He pulled out again.

After being fucked for so long, Xie Qingcheng seemed to have grown accustomed to his girth, but he couldn't help but whimper softly as He Yu withdrew with a wet squelch. Without his cock blocking its flow, his come came gushing out of Xie Qingcheng's tight passage. He Yu's belly warmed at the sight of this powerfully stubborn man reduced to leaking come; he really wanted to fuck him to death. Panting, He Yu rubbed the rounded head of his length against the soft give of Xie Qingcheng's hole.

He actually said, like an ignorant adolescent experiencing his first erection, "Doctor Xie, I feel so swollen here. And you're so wet down there… Please, Doctor, will we both feel good if I stick it in like this?"

Xie Qingcheng clutched at the sheets, eyes flaring red with anger beneath the makeshift blindfold. He couldn't see He Yu right now, but he could imagine the wicked expression on his face. He should never have taken pity on this pathetic jackass in the first place! If he hadn't, he would never have let himself get swindled by this ingrate and reduced to such a state!

He Yu was still rubbing his cock against Xie Qingcheng's entrance. As he rubbed and rubbed, he slipped the tip in, stirring through the wetness within before pulling out again. The stimulation made Xie Qingcheng's inner walls spasm, come spilling out in a continuous flood.

"Doctor Xie…" He Yu began, his voice rough. "Hurry up and teach me. I can't take it… Teach me… To make love, do I stick it in here?

"Doctor, you've done it with a woman before, haven't you? Can you tell me…how to do it so that we both feel good?

"How should I do it so that my partner will get pregnant with my child?"

His words were getting more and more outrageous. "Fuck off," Xie Qingcheng snapped. "He Yu, seriously fuck off!"

In lieu of fucking off, He Yu continued to whisper licentiously into his ear. Xie Qingcheng's whole body flushed, his pale skin blooming with color like a ripe peach blossom.

"Doctor Xie, what's this liquid seeping out of you? You're so wet… Is it semen? Who else did you have sex with, Doctor Xie? Did he make you feel good?"

"You've gone too fucking far—are you going to fuck off or not?!"

He Yu slid his fingers into Xie Qingcheng's hole and twisted them wickedly.

“You’re so hot and wet… Doctor Xie, do you want me to feed you my cock?”

Xie Qingcheng was about to lose it. Who the hell would believe He Yu capable of such filth?! He couldn’t take it anymore. Struggling free of He Yu’s grip, he tried to remove the black blindfold. But He Yu stopped him.

“Don’t move.”

Silence.

“If you won’t teach me, Doctor, then I’ll just have to try it by myself… Tell me if I’m doing it right, okay, Doctor Xie?”

“Like hell I’ll…ahh!”

Before he could finish, He Yu, already patient past his limit, plunged the entirety of his searingly hard cock into Xie Qingcheng’s ass. Blindfolded as he was, he was completely caught off guard. His fingers trembled.

“You’re so hot…and so tight… Doctor, why are you sucking on my cock down here? Are you having a physiological reaction too?”

“Fuck… Ahh… Fuck off…!”

“You’re sucking me so hard, and you won’t stop… Should I thrust a little deeper?”

“Nngh…” Pain twisted with arousal as reason and depravity reached an impasse. Xie Qingcheng’s body was drenched in sweat; He Yu was about to drive him crazy.

The little beast had way too many tricks up his sleeve…

“Doctor, when I thrust into you like this, is that called ‘making love’?” He Yu murmured salaciously into Xie Qingcheng’s ear. “Is this how girls get pregnant? Do you do this with your wife?” He pulled out all the way before fucking back into that sloppy, tight hole—again and again, with such force that Xie Qingcheng’s waist began to shake. The atmosphere in the room was beginning to make He Yu feel like he was in high school again, and the idea that he really had been ravishing his personal doctor way back then made him even more excited.

“If I keep fucking you like this, will you feel good? Will you come on my cock…?”

He kept crooning filthy things like “Doctor, please teach me,” acting like an adolescent boy exploring sex for the first time, but his hips never stopped moving as he kept on thrusting himself into Xie Qingcheng’s hole. The soft flesh of Xie Qingcheng’s insides convulsed around his wanton invasion.

“Am I doing it right? Doctor Xie, does it feel good when I fuck you?”

Xie Qingcheng was the First Emperor; his constitution adapted easily to new stimuli. Each time he and He Yu had sex, his body would remember the feeling and respond by acclimating him to the act. He Yu’s impressions of Xie Qingcheng’s body becoming wetter, of him experiencing more pleasure the more he fucked him, were all real, not hallucinations.

All the times he’d already slept with He Yu had trained Xie Qingcheng’s body to be highly sensitive. He was sexually rigid by nature and reluctant to show weakness—but nevertheless, that intensely pleasurable tingling sensation still kept on emanating from the place where he and He Yu were connected. He tried to keep

any loss of control from showing on his face, his eyebrows pinching in a stubborn frown as he spread his legs and endured He Yu's repeated defilement. But his cheeks were flushed—suffused with an amorous haze—and his fucked-out hole kept sucking desperately at He Yu's dick.

They were both breathing rapidly, and He Yu could feel Xie Qingcheng tightening around him. Overcome, he tightened his grip around Xie Qingcheng's lithe waist and fucked him faster and faster, his breath growing increasingly labored.

"So good… Doctor, you're squeezing me so tight… Ahh…" He pinned the blindfolded Xie Qingcheng down on the bed and thrust in hard. Wetness gushed out, soaking the sheets. "I'm getting more and more swollen down here, Doctor…" He Yu murmured. He knew he was about to come, yet he deliberately slowed down, rubbing leisurely against Xie Qingcheng's inner walls. "It's so swollen, like something's about to come out…"

Xie Qingcheng clenched his jaw, enduring it as He Yu wantonly toyed with his body. "Pull out," he said through gritted teeth. "You… You really can't…come inside me again today…"

He Yu slammed back in, and his voice splintered into a muffled groan. "But I don't want to come outside. I want to come inside you. You spilled so much semen when we were making love just now, Doctor… It's such a waste… I want to fill you back up…" Once again, he pinned Xie Qingcheng, whom he had driven to the brink of madness, and began plowing into the sweet furl of his ass.

"Doctor Xie… I want to come inside you today. I want you to teach me how to get someone pregnant… I want you to teach me *personally*…how to make you pregnant with my child…"

Before Xie Qingcheng could respond, He Yu flipped him onto his side, lifted one of his legs, and speared back inside with an intoxicated look on his face, making the bed shake violently.

"Ahh…ahh…ahh…"

He Yu's bed was very sturdy, yet as their movements grew wilder and wilder, it began to judder and creak uncontrollably.

It was then that He Yu's landline, which was sitting at the head of the bed, suddenly began to ring. He ignored it at first; he had abandoned himself utterly to his and Xie Qingcheng's intense coupling, and was too busy enthusiastically fucking him to give a damn who was calling. But the calls came one after another until He Yu finally dragged the telephone set over in irritation and checked the caller ID—

Lü Zhishu.

The name was such a mood killer that He Yu yanked the phone right out of the wall. He kissed Xie Qingcheng again. "My darling wife, let's continue."

"Who the hell are you calling—ahh!"

Xie Qingcheng was cut off by a brutal thrust. He Yu said "let's continue," but he had never stopped in the first place. When he reached for the phone, his hips had slowed slightly, but even so, he had kept rubbing against Xie Qingcheng's prostate throughout. The moments before climax were always the most pleasurable; both of their eyes were dark with desire. But while He Yu was completely immersed in his

longing, Xie Qingcheng still struggled to maintain some measure of clarity.

The bed shook violently as He Yu picked up speed again. “It feels so good… Doctor Xie… Have you ever thought about me fucking you on this bed? Have you?”

He pinned Xie Qingcheng down and thrust into him nonstop. Xie Qingcheng couldn’t get a word out; all he could do was endure the rough pounding. His thighs were completely soaked by now, come and slick splattering out with an obscene squelch as their bodies slammed wildly into each other. They had knocked all of the pillows from the bed amid their mounting pleasure. In that moment, it seemed that all that existed in this world was each other and their frenzied coupling.

“Ahhh… He Yu… He Yu, slow down…”

“Wifey, I just want to fuck you to death… I just want to fuck you forever… You’re really too erotic…”

Their movements grew more and more unhinged when—

Knock knock knock.

This interruption was even worse than the phone call—there was someone knocking at He Yu’s bedroom door. Xie Qingcheng and He Yu had been completely absorbed by their fucking; neither of them had noticed the approaching footsteps.

But now He Yu heard a voice coming from outside: “He Yu, are you in there?”

It was He Jiwei! Today was He Yu’s birthday, after all. It was only to be expected that Lü Zhishu and He Jiwei give their well-wishes.

It was purely a coincidence that He Jiwei had come back today. Although he had recently returned to Huzhou, he was a very busy man and had an early flight the next morning. He had planned on having his secretary go home on his behalf to pick up some work-related materials. But when he suddenly remembered it was He Yu’s birthday today, he’d decided to make the trip himself.

He Jiwei hadn’t been paying much attention when he ascended the stairs to look for He Yu, so he didn’t hear the intense movement within He Yu’s room. As a consequence, he knocked on He Yu’s door without the slightest hesitation. He Yu froze—he’d never expected his dad to be home!

But Xie Qingcheng was even more horror-struck than He Yu was. He blanched as he recognized with utmost clarity that he had gone insane, having sex with his former employer’s son in a place like this! The realization was like a bucket of water poured over his head, snapping him back to full awareness in an instant. His damp eyes scarlet with arousal, he tried to struggle upright only to be shoved back down by He Yu.

“Don’t move,” He Yu said. “Ignore him. As long as the door stays closed, we’ll be fine.”

“Like hell I’ll—”

He Yu covered his mouth before he could finish speaking. Then, he did something that nearly caused Xie Qingcheng to break down. He Yu didn’t give a fuck that He Jiwei was standing right at his door. He just started fucking Xie Qingcheng again.

The room grew quieter as his thrusts became shallower, but the rhythmic creaking of the bed and the slap of their bodies were still clearly audible from outside. Xie Qingcheng's eyes widened. It was as if they were a pair of clandestine lovers having a secret affair. The feeling was as agonizing as it was arousing. In all his thirty-some years, he had never done something like this before.

"Fuck… It's so good…" He Yu was overwhelmed by the pleasure of Xie Qingcheng's passage shivering around his cock; how could he possibly care who was standing outside his door? He clamped his hand over Xie Qingcheng's mouth and kept fucking him into the soft mattress.

Slap, slap, slap…

The obscene squelches continued, accompanied by the creaking of the bed, which shook beneath them as He Yu plunged into Xie Qingcheng to a vigorous rhythm. He Jiwei fell silent behind the door. Evidently, he had heard the noises coming from within the room, and realized that his son was having sex.

Xie Qingcheng began to struggle in earnest. This completely defied moral conventions. He couldn't take it.

He Yu pinned him down and murmured into his ear, "Don't be scared. Keep making love to me. If you don't make any noise, he won't come in." He plastered himself against Xie Qingcheng's back and slowly rocked his hips. "My dad will never guess that it's you. He'll assume I got bored celebrating my birthday alone this year and decided to bring a girl home. This sort of thing isn't unusual in our social circles."

Xie Qingcheng gritted his teeth. He still couldn't accept something as crazy as willingly having sex right under He Jiwei's nose. It was truly…truly beyond insane… He trembled uncontrollably as He Yu pinned him down and fucked him at a pace that was neither too fast nor too slow. "Stop," he rasped. "Stop it… You need to stop… He Yu… Stop… Ahh…"

His refusal to cooperate, the extent to which he cared about the fact that He Yu was He Jiwei's son, and the way he kept trying to climb off of the bed caused an inexplicable wave of resentment and jealousy to surge through He Yu's heart. "Keep struggling and I'll take you out and fuck you right in front of him," he hissed. "I'll get you on your knees and fuck you into the ground while he watches."

Xie Qingcheng tensed at He Yu's words. The feeling of Xie Qingcheng's ass squeezing around him had pleasure flickering over He Yu's face, and he had to take a moment to catch his breath before he could continue. "I'll let him see exactly how the doctor he hired for my sake treats me in bed—how Doctor Xie spreads his legs for me."

He Yu's eyes flashed with a frenzied light as the wrist monitor flickered between red and orange. Xie Qingcheng couldn't tell if these were the words of a madman or if he was earnest; he found himself frozen in place. Satisfied with his reaction, He Yu hugged and kissed him. He began passionately plowing into Xie Qingcheng again, dragging out the intense sensation of preorgasmic bliss.

"So good… Fuck…"

He had no intention of stopping. The wet sound of thrusting, the slap of skin on skin, and the creaking of the bed grew even louder.

Standing at the door, He Jiwei could hear through the wood panels that the people inside were ramping up to their wildest and most intense yet; there was no way they were about to stop now. As a father, he felt rather awkward witnessing something so sordid. But although he found the situation inappropriate, He Yu was twenty years old; sleeping with some female influencer wasn't unusual in their social circles.

The sounds in the bedroom grew increasingly fervid. He could hear He Yu's ragged gasps and the quickening clap of bodies—but the woman He Yu had brought home seemed rather shy. She didn't make any sound at all, apparently enduring his son's aggressive lovemaking in silence. He Jiwei stood at the door for a while in silence, face pale, before finally walking away to avoid an embarrassing encounter.

The moment Executive He's footsteps faded away, He Yu became even more unbridled. Releasing the hand that was muffling Xie Qingcheng's cries, he pounded into him to his heart's content, his heavy breaths filling the air. Xie Qingcheng could feel He Yu's searing cock thickening and throbbing as it plunged into his body, a sign of his imminent climax. He knew that the accumulated pleasure from fucking him for so long was about to tip He Yu over the edge.

The feeling sent chills down Xie Qingcheng's spine; he really couldn't take it anymore. He had spent an entire night being filled up with He Yu's spend, but most terrifying of all, his body seemed to be slowly adapting to it. His male instinct gave him an innate fear of another man coming inside him; in order to protect him, however, the First Emperor's physiology amplified the pleasure he felt each time He Yu shot his load into his body. Fear and ecstasy intertwined, and Xie Qingcheng struggled to catch his breath.

"Let me go…" This lust-crazed tryst was causing him to lose his sense of self, and he wanted to put an end to it. He tried again to remove the blindfold, but He Yu caught his hands and pinned them back down. A note of distress entered Xie Qingcheng's voice. "Let me go… I really can't take any more come… Ahh… He Yu… Stop… Stop thrusting… I really…feel so strange… Ahh…"

He Yu was on the verge of finishing; there was no way he could stop now. Just like always, Xie Qingcheng's pleading sent a jolt of pleasure through him. *Why does he never learn?* he wondered with a sigh. With Xie Qingcheng's wrists held in a crushing grip, he pressed him back into the bed, subduing the disheveled man whom he had fucked to the point of unalloyed anguish.

After a handful of powerful thrusts, He Yu creamed himself against Xie Qingcheng's most sensitive spot with a muffled groan. Xie Qingcheng's entire body tensed to the extreme; his neck arched in a beautiful curve, his eyes blinded by black cloth and his pale pink lips slightly open as his slender legs wrapped tightly around He Yu's waist.

"Ah… Ahh…!"

This time, Xie Qingcheng had been completely fucked open. Each time He Yu shot a pulse of come into his body elicited an involuntary, full-bodied shudder, and a hoarse, stirring cry of orgasmic pleasure.

"Ahh… He Yu… Ahhh… Stop coming… Please, I'm begging you… I'm so full… Ahh…! Stop coming… I don't want anymore… I don't want anymore… Ahh… Ahhh!"

"No… I can't stop myself, I just have to come inside you…"

How could He Yu possibly control himself? Xie Qingcheng was driving him mad. The sound of his moans simply made him want to die buried within the man's warmth. He Yu rubbed his cock against Xie Qingcheng's insides as he fiercely, fervently, possessively released his load against his prostate.

"He Yu… I can't bear it anymore… Let me go… Ahh…!"

As the most powerful gush of come yet spilled out of his cock, He Yu felt Xie Qingcheng's body go limp beneath him with a harsh gasp. Though his eyes were covered with the black blindfold, He Yu knew that he was crying. He felt a blend of pity and pleasure as he reached out to remove the strip of fabric; as expected, that peach-blossom gaze was stained with tears. He had fucked him till he cried.

Instead of pulling out, He Yu kissed Xie Qingcheng's eyes, his wild ardor yet unpacified. "Ge…" He Yu kissed him. "Were you really scared just now? …Don't be scared. I was lying. I love you so much, I couldn't bear hurting you even a little. How could I possibly allow you to be seen by my dad? There there, don't be scared…"

He caressed Xie Qingcheng's face with incomparable tenderness. He took this man whom he had nearly tortured past the breaking point into his arms, kissing and comforting him as they lay in bed. The boy who had been so outrageous and ruthless while making love became docile as a giant dog in the afterglow. He carded his hand through Xie Qingcheng's damp fringe and ran a crooked finger over his sweaty forehead and vacant eyes, before finally closing his own eyes and pressing a reverent kiss to the man's brow.

"I'll always love you… Xie Qingcheng… My sweet wife… My darling… Doctor Xie… Ge, thank you… In the twenty years I've been alive, this is the best birthday I've ever had. You've healed all of my wounds… You're the only one who can heal all of my wounds… Xie Qingcheng, I love you.

"I will always love you…"

Chapter 152:
Our Affair Was Discovered

SURE ENOUGH, following He Yu home on his birthday meant Xie Qingcheng was stuck with him for the entire night.

As if determined to wipe away the humiliation of Xie Qingcheng's claim that by ancient standards he would still be a minor at nineteen, the newly twenty-year-old He Yu committed all manner of sin, entangling passionately with him time and again. He Jiwei arriving at his door did nothing to spoil He Yu's mood; rather, it aroused him even further, and he only fucked Xie Qingcheng even harder.

The brat was practically inhuman, Xie Qingcheng thought. Over the course of the night, he'd been fucked twice into unconsciousness only to wake up and find He Yu still thrusting into him with a dazed look on his face. Aside from a few necessary moments of rest, He Yu's wanton passions carried on without pause for nearly a full day and night. The two of them didn't wake up afterward till the following afternoon.

When Xie Qingcheng opened his eyes, he found He Yu staring at him intently.

"Ge… Good morning."

"…What time is it?" Xie Qingcheng's voice was hoarse beyond recognition.

He Yu had the audacity to blush. "It's…almost two in the afternoon," he said quietly.

Xie Qingcheng lay on the bed, his long lashes trembling, for a long time. As he slowly came to his senses, he felt extremely conflicted. Luckily, he was a calm man by nature, and not easily startled. No matter how delirious he became in the heat of passion, it never took long for him to gather himself in the aftermath. He sighed. In lieu of saying anything else, he reached for the pile of his clothes that had been tossed at the head of the bed to dig out a cigarette with a slender, tattooed hand.

He Yu stopped him.

The little beast was capable of spewing all manner of garbage in bed, but now that he was done bullying Xie Qingcheng, he felt a bit embarrassed. "Don't smoke," he said in a coaxing voice. "It's bad for your health."

He Yu had worn him down; Xie Qingcheng could barely muster any anger, just shot him a chilly glance. "And what you did to me is good for my health?"

He Yu didn't try to defend himself; he knew that he was in the wrong. He thought for a moment. "Ge, let me massage your waist," he said quietly.

Xie Qingcheng gave him a look.

"It'll make you feel better," He Yu tried again.

Xie Qingcheng immediately began to feel worse. He ignored this offer. The best way to deal with a giant dog trying to ingratiate itself after it had caused trouble was to pay no attention to it. If he *did* pay it any attention, the dog would

perk up its tail, and then they'd be right back where they started. Since Xie Qingcheng made no response, He Yu took the initiative to begin carefully kneading at his waist. He didn't use much force, but very accurately massaged all of Xie Qingcheng's sore spots, starting from his waist and working his way steadily down to his thighs and calves.

He had once read the Japanese romance novel *Shunkinshō* by Tanizaki Jun'ichirō, which told the story of a pair of lovers who were both teacher and student and master and servant. In the novel, there was an instance where the male student warmed his teacher's feet against his own chest to make her more comfortable.

When He Yu read that scene, though he understood the protagonist's perverse infatuation, he hadn't thought it was particularly romantic. But now, as he massaged Xie Qingcheng's legs, he suddenly understood the character's deep love. He couldn't resist rubbing at his pale feet, faintly lined with light blue veins, warming them up before holding them against his own chest and kneading them gently.

Xie Qingcheng opened his eyes slightly to gaze at him. Finally, he couldn't help asking, "You've studied massage before?"

He Yu hummed quietly in affirmation, lashes lowered as he pressed against the meridians on the dorsal side of Xie Qingcheng's foot.

"What did you learn it for?"

"Back when we were at the Yi Family Village, I noticed your body was really cold, so I decided to learn how to do this in my spare time. It's good for improving circulation and preventing blood stasis."

Xie Qingcheng fell silent.

He had been planning on telling He Yu that their relationship had no future—that they shouldn't continue as they were—after they watched the opera. But he hadn't been counting on it being He Yu's twentieth birthday, nor had he anticipated something like this happening afterward. Listening to him talk and watching as he gently rubbed his aching pressure points on this peaceful afternoon, Xie Qingcheng found himself incapable of saying those words aloud.

He was a decisive person, a man who became hard-hearted and unfeeling when he'd made his mind up about something. But for some reason, when it came to He Yu, he found himself growing more and more hesitant.

It wasn't like him at all. But over time, he had become increasingly reluctant to hurt He Yu. It was as if he was afflicted with a slow-acting poison.

It happened to be Saturday. The two of them spent a little more time resting in bed, and by the time they arose and finished washing up, it was already nearly four in the afternoon. He Yu left his room to take a look around. He Jiwei must have had business to attend to at his company, because he'd already left the house, leaving behind a present and a birthday card on the table. The villa had excellent soundproofing, so He Yu figured his father hadn't clearly heard the noises coming from his room and would have assumed that he'd brought a female companion home to spend the night.

How could it possibly occur to him that the person in He Yu's bed last night was Xie Qingcheng? Never mind He Jiwei, even those who knew He Yu well would never imagine that he would get involved with a thirty-something man. Similarly, those who were familiar with Xie Qingcheng would never have guessed that a

powerful and austere man like Doctor Xie would end up moaning hoarsely as he was fucked senseless by a boy who had yet to graduate from university…

When He Yu had finished his investigation of the premises and returned to his room, he found Xie Qingcheng standing by the window and gazing at the lawn outside: at the place of his and He Yu's first meeting.

It had been as spring transitioned into summer. He walked down the winding corridor with a bouquet of summer hydrangeas in hand. A gust of wind had blown free the tulle covering the bouquet and carried it into the distance where a group of children were playing, and a boy had picked it up and handed it back to him. He had been so young and well-behaved back then, the top of his head just clearing Xie Qingcheng's waist. To think that he and Xie Qingcheng would one day end up…

"Xie-ge."

He Yu's return interrupted his thoughts.

"Let's get something to eat." Afraid that Xie Qingcheng would reject him, He Yu added, "I don't have anyone to eat cake with."

After a moment of thought, Xie Qingcheng decided to let it go. Why should a full-grown man like him bicker with a twenty-year-old brat over matters of sex when they had already done the deed? He gave in. "Fine, my treat," he said nonchalantly.

The two of them left unseen through He Yu's personal elevator. As they got into the taxi, He Yu suddenly felt that something was wrong—usually, after two people had sex, wasn't the man supposed to take his wife out for a good meal, buy her nice things, and generally make her happy? Why was it that, after He Yu had fucked Xie Qingcheng all night long, Xie Qingcheng was the one who was footing the bill? But Xie-ge spent the entire ride staring out the window at the fleeting streetlights. He looked preoccupied, and not particularly happy. After some consideration, He Yu decided he better not say anything for now lest he anger him.

Though Xie Qingcheng didn't immediately start ignoring him the moment he pulled on his pants this time, He Yu nevertheless had some PTSD. He was worried that Xie Qingcheng had only condescended to keep him company because it was his birthday. After fumbling around blindly for so long and ending up battered and bloody countless times, He Yu had more or less figured out how to coax an uncle like Xie Qingcheng into going along with some of his desires, after all.

Xie Qingcheng asked the taxi driver to take them to a hot pot restaurant. It was filled mostly with young people; apparently the business was owned by an influencer. When it first opened, scalpers were selling reservations at over 100 RMB a table.

They had come before the evening rush, so they didn't have to wait to get seated. Xie Qingcheng scanned the QR code for the menu, then tossed his cell phone to He Yu. "Here," he said. "Order whatever you like."

He Yu paused, feeling a bit strange. What did you call a guy who spent a full day and night vigorously plowing his woman's—or bottom's—fertile fields only to be treated to dinner afterward?

You called him a sugar baby.

Sugar baby He Yu refused to admit that he was a gigolo. But he didn't dare say a word of protest. Under his sugar daddy's placid gaze, he picked up the man's

cell phone and ordered a few dishes that looked reasonably palatable, before dutifully handing it back to Xie Qingcheng.

"That's it?"

"I don't eat hot pot all that much. You can order more if you like, Ge."

Xie Qingcheng frowned slightly. "I don't eat hot pot much either."

"Then why would you—"

"Xie Xue likes it," he answered. "She comes here often. I thought all you young folks liked this kind of thing."

He Yu suddenly felt like he had a chance.

Where had Xie Qingcheng taken him the last time he treated him to a meal? A vegetarian restaurant for middle-aged and elderly people! He had ordered a full spread of vegetarian dishes so coldly ascetic that he felt he could have gone straight from eating them to entering a monastery. That time, Xie Qingcheng had been trying to trick him—to silently warn him that the distance between them was too vast, that they weren't suitable for each other. But this time, he had considered things from a young person's perspective.

He'd guessed wrong—He Yu was after all an anomaly among young people, one who didn't care to roll up his sleeves and dig into a steaming meal of hot pot—but he still felt a rush of warmth in his heart.

"If I'm with you, I'm happy to eat anything," he said.

That's not what you said last time at the vegetarian restaurant, Xie Qingcheng thought impassively.

He added a bunch of dishes, even ordering a plate of milk pudding bunnies for He Yu from the kids' menu. The waiter served them one after another. Eating hot pot was a lively activity, with gorgeous cuts of meat arrayed on beds of ice. Slices of bloodred prime grade beef marbled with snow-white fat were placed in the simmering pot and quickly curled in the boiling broth, releasing the delicious aroma of cooking meat in an intense blend of scent and color, like a joyous climax.

Raw fish and raw meat, thinly sliced, to be collected at one's leisure. No wonder young men and women loved to eat it.

Xie Qingcheng even offhandedly ordered a platter of raw oysters. He Yu raised an eyebrow when the plump, tender shellfish arrived—he couldn't help reading into the gesture. It was said that sugar mommies with voracious appetites would often order raw oysters for their young paramours to boost their sexual potency. Did this mean Xie Qingcheng wanted him to redouble his efforts…?

Xie Qingcheng flagged down a waiter. "This isn't ours."

He Yu realized he was overthinking it.

The waiter hurriedly checked their order before bowing apologetically. "Sirs, please accept this on the house," he said before withdrawing.

A short while later, the waiter hastily brought another platter of fresh, plump oysters to the table across from them, where a voluptuous, wealthy woman in a dress with a plunging neckline was sitting with a handsome young man who looked to still be in college. The woman picked up an oyster, the tender flesh quivering between her chopsticks the living embodiment of desire.

She smiled flirtatiously, her charming eyes like silk, as she rinsed the raw oyster in the boiling water, dipped it in sweet and spicy sauce, and placed it on her companion's plate. "Eat more, sweetheart," she said, doting. "You still have a lot of work to do tonight~"

Noticing Xie Qingcheng's grimace, He Yu hastily served him some food. "Ge, have some of this instead. Who the hell eats oysters anyway? Waiter, take them away. It's obvious these aren't fresh anymore."

Besides, he was only twenty, and it had been a long time since he last slept with Xie Qingcheng. A full day and night was nothing—he could go three days straight without needing to replenish his vigor.

Toward the end of their meal, Xie Qingcheng ordered a serving of longevity noodles, which he tossed into the mandarin duck pot. Once the broth came to a boil, he scooped the noodles into a bowl along with some of the pork tripe and chicken soup base and passed it to He Yu.

"Eat this. Your twentieth birthday is an important milestone; longevity noodles are a must."

He Yu took the bowl and stared at him for a long while. "Xie Qingcheng…"

"Don't get sentimental with me now."

He Yu gently nudged his leg with his foot under the table. Xie Qingcheng frowned and was about to sidestep when He Yu reached out and wrapped his hand around the pale line of words that encircled his wrist like a bracelet. Underneath the snow-white tablecloth, no one could see the boy rubbing his foot repeatedly against the man's leg, like a dragon entwining with its mate. He tapped Xie Qingcheng five times, paused, tapped him twice, paused again, and finally tapped him one last time.[1]

There was a trace of mischief in He Yu's smile even when he was being gentle. "Do you understand what I mean?"

Xie Qingcheng pulled his wrist out of He Yu's grasp and picked up his glass. He calmly took a sip of the cheap red wine, moistening his mouth and staining his pale lips scarlet, then leaned back in his chair. There was no need to play dumb—after all, it wasn't as if he feared He Yu. "You still pull these sorts of middle-school tricks at twenty years old?" he said.

He was acting like he was above it all, yet he had been fucked by this young man just last night. On the bed in which He Yu had slept since he was six or seven years old, Xie Qingcheng had been forced to endure his passion again and again, until he was trembling uncontrollably all over. If he were a woman, he would probably be pregnant. His voice had been so hoarse, so pleasantly low last night; how dignified could he possibly sound to He Yu today?

He Yu's throat went dry, as if he had become inflamed from eating too much hot pot.

He was staring dreamily at Xie Qingcheng when his cell phone suddenly went off. Snapping back to his senses, he looked down to see that the caller was Lü Zhishu.

"He Yu, where are you?" she demanded as soon as he picked up. "Who's with you?"

He Yu glanced at Doctor Xie sitting across the table, playfulness unfurling in his heart. “I’m seeing a doctor.”

Sure enough, that gave Lü Zhishu a fright. “A doctor? Are you feeling sick again?”

“No, it’s just…a massage parlor… I’m getting physical therapy.”

“For a moment I thought… Ah, as long as you’re feeling okay,” she said, relieved. “My flight was delayed yesterday, so I couldn’t make it back in time for your birthday. I tried to call you, but you didn’t answer. I hope you’re not upset with me.”

He Yu smiled. “Of course not,” he said sincerely.

“Where are you right now? I just got home. I’ll have the chauffeur come pick you up. I’ve prepared a—”

“I’m busy tonight, so I’m not heading back yet,” He Yu interrupted. “Mom, you do what you need to do. I’ll be hanging up now.”

“Hello? …Hello?”

Lü Zhishu stood in the villa holding her cell phone, angry and confused as she watched the household staff bustling about preparing a birthday party. After a few beats of silence, she turned to the housekeeper. “Where did He Yu go today? And when did he leave? Is there any surveillance footage?”

“Madam, you know the young master has his own personal elevator and passageway, and he’s a computer expert. He’s never allowed the surveillance cameras to monitor his private spaces, so…”

Lü Zhishu stamped her feet in fury, then spun on her heel, heading for the underground parking garage. She was planning on going to his university campus to see if her son was with that vixen Xie Xue. Unable to wait any longer, she dialed the family chauffeur as she walked toward her most oft-used ride, the Rolls-Royce Cullinan.

When she pulled open the car door, she was stunned.

The back seat of the car had been reduced to a filthy mess. There was a necktie, crumpled tissues, and…

Lü Zhishu’s eyes widened in disbelief, her complexion alternating between shades of green and white as she spotted the condom lying on the leather back seat —evidence of an impulsive but intense tryst that had taken place recently in the back of the car. The condom had been used, but there wasn’t much fluid inside.

Lü Zhishu realized at once that He Yu must have found it uncomfortable to wear and taken it off before directly…

She blanched.

He Yu and Xie Xue had already gotten this far? This was absurd! He—he had truly gone overboard. What if the girl got pregnant?!

Chapter 153:
Flowing Wantonly

AFTER THEY FINISHED their meal, He Yu still couldn't bear to let Xie Qingcheng leave.

He thought for a moment before he started pestering him again. "Xie-ge, you've been with me for so long already. Go to a bar with me. It's the weekend, so we don't need to work or study…"

"It's too late. I have books to read when I get back."

"You're worse than a pig if you read books on the weekend," He Yu shot back.

"…Try insulting me again."

He Yu coughed. "Can you…come with me one more time?"

"No."

"It's my twenty-first birthday today—"

"Your birthday was last night, and I already celebrated it with you."

He Yu thought in circles until he finally came up with something. "Remember that bet you made with me?"

Xie Qingcheng frowned. "What?"

"When I helped you make the PowerPoint. Didn't you want me to make your students who skipped class come back? If I brought back more students than you did, I won. And since you lost, you have to agree to one of my requests…"

Xie Qingcheng wasn't so sure, but he thought he remembered something of the sort. "I didn't agree to any other requests?"

"No, you've owed me one this whole time."

He frowned. "Really?"

"Yeah. You're a man, aren't you? You have to keep your word." He Yu knew how to trap Xie Qingcheng with what mattered to him most. "A man wouldn't go back on his word."

"…Your request is for me to go with you to a bar, is it?"

He Yu nodded.

Xie Qingcheng had no way out. He acquiesced. "Which one? I'll call a cab." He was acting like such a sugar daddy.

He Yu cocked his head, mulling it over. "It's not far. We can walk over together and digest our food while we do."

The Bund was crowded on the weekends. There were exploring tourists, couples holding hands, older uncles and aunties fiddling with their phones to take photos, blonde, blue-eyed foreigners out for an evening jog… Two men walking side by side in the midst of it all was hardly strange. Or perhaps the city was naturally inclusive and magical. Even the old lady selling flowers on the street didn't care if couples were same-sex or heterosexual, or even if they were just

colleagues and friends—she simply went up to them with a smile and tried to sell her fresh roses.

"Young man, buy some flowers for your girlfriend…"

"Sir, buy some flowers for your wife."

"Miss, buy some flowers. You don't even have to buy them—think of it as a present from me. Here, take it."

The flower-selling ladies knew very well that, apart from men who liked to put on airs in front of their girlfriends, young girls were their best target. Younger women were usually softhearted, so when the ladies pushed the flowers toward them, saying they were free, they were spinning a web of gratitude; what kind girl would have the heart to take advantage of a graying old lady? In the end, they'd always feel bad and pay.

The flower-selling ladies dodged the city management officers, wandering around until they finally appeared in front of Xie Qingcheng and He Yu. Business opportunities couldn't be missed. Sales could be made to two men, too! And the ladies had long since realized that there was a type of man nowadays called…called "gae"!

"Handsome, buy some flowers for…" As soon as the old lady saw He Yu and Xie Qingcheng together, she decided that Xie Qingcheng, the handsome, tall, mature, and stable man, must be the sponsor. She laid it on thick. "For your…um, your friend."

She handed over a gorgeous red rose.

Though Xie Qingcheng felt sorry for her, he wasn't willing to buy flowers for He Yu. After a moment of silence, he apologized and left with his hands in his pockets.

She tried He Yu instead. "Young man, buy some flowers for your gege. Look at how handsome he is."

He Yu was elated. "You think he's handsome, too?"

The old lady pressed her advantage. "He's the most handsome man on this block."

He Yu smiled and opened his Alipay, scanning the old lady's QR code, and transferred her enough money to buy all of her roses. "I'll just take one," he said. "You can give the others away."

"Ah…" The old lady was stunned. Even in the wealthiest part of Huzhou, selling fresh flowers wasn't that easy. She stared at her phone in disbelief at the amount of money it displayed. By the time she could react, He Yu had already picked out a half-opened rose and taken off after Xie Qingcheng.

The open-minded Huzhou lady murmured the flower-selling blessing she'd recited countless times before. "I wish you good health and happiness… Aiya, no, I wish you a long and happy marriage?"

He Yu returned to Xie Qingcheng's side with a rose in hand. Xie Qingcheng glanced at him. "Why did you buy that?"

"I'm being kind and charitable."

Xie Qingcheng was speechless. They walked alongside each other for a while. Two handsome guys, one of them holding a flower, attracted a lot of glances

from the young ladies that passed them. Xie Qingcheng started feeling a bit uncomfortable.

"He Yu, do you have to hold that flower?"

"Why shouldn't I hold it? I bought it."

That was reasonable. Even Xie Qingcheng couldn't refute that. "How much farther?" he asked instead.

"We're almost there."

Xie Qingcheng thought He Yu was going to take him to some den of iniquity rampant with dancing demons, so he'd already preemptively accepted the situation and was prepared to face his (figurative) death with equanimity. But surprisingly, he took him to a century-old hotel. It was built during the British Concession, was renamed several times over the past century, and had hosted countless celebrities and politicians. Every brick and tile seemed to hold charming, exciting legends of a city populated by foreigners.

Traces of history could be seen right from the entrance. The oldest ventilation system was still working, and the greyhound totem above the door guarded the hotel. The piano sitting at the center of the restaurant was over a hundred years old, and the comedy master Chaplin had once skipped his fingers joyfully across those keys. In a corner of the hotel's lobby was a jazz bar that seemed inconspicuous, but was steeped in history.

The special thing about the bar's band was that the performers were all over seventy years old; they were named the Senior Jazz Band. Like aged wine that had settled in a jar, they were calm and relaxed, while their melodies echoed history. It was a charm that other bands couldn't replicate. Visiting foreign presidents often listened to them perform out of curiosity.

"Welcome, gentlemen. Good evening. May I ask if you two have a reservation?" the receptionist at the entrance, a woman with a perm wearing a snow-white shawl and a qipao, asked politely.

He Yu had been so focused that he'd forgotten the small pub was unable to accommodate the large audience attracted by the Senior Jazz Band on the weekends, so reservations were required. "I don't," he replied.

He was unwilling to accept this, though; he used his charms instead. "Miss, we're from Dongbei, near Mohe City, and came here just so we could hear your band perform. We have to leave tomorrow morning. Could you possibly add another table? Or, we could hang around and see if any guests leave early?"

Xie Qingcheng was speechless. It was a waste of talent for He Yu not to go into acting—he could even fake a Dongbei accent.

In the face of He Yu's sincerity, handsome looks, and almond-shaped eyes gazing eagerly at her, the receptionist found herself flustered. It was against the rules, but still she wavered for a moment before turning around. "Let me take a look."

"Really, thank you so much. Oh, and…this is for you."

He placed the rose he'd been holding onto the entire way into the vase on the receptionist's desk. Her face flushed, and she flitted away on her high heels to do her job.

"…You're ridiculous," said Xie Qingcheng.

He Yu leaned against the receptionist's desk and looked at him with a smile. "What, you just realized?"

A few minutes later, the pretty lady came back. "I added an extra table in the corner," she said quietly. "Please come in."

If walking from the other side of the river to the exotic architecture on the Bund was like traveling through time, then walking from the hotel lobby into the jazz bar was like entering a whole new dimension out of their time entirely. Though Xie Qingcheng was from Huzhou, he'd never been here before. It was like being in a clip from an old American movie that showed a small European or American tavern during World War II.

"The floors, fans, and brick walls here are the originals from a hundred years ago, when the hotel was first built," He Yu said. He'd noticed that Xie Qingcheng was looking at the wooden fan blades, the sort that had long since disappeared from the outside world. He smiled. "How about it? I didn't take you to a den of seduction, did I?"

Xie Qingcheng raised a brow, surprised that He Yu knew what he'd been thinking earlier.

The bartender, dressed in a neat suit, came up to their small, round table with a leather drink menu and a smile on his face. "What can I get for you, gentlemen?"

"Order anything you want." Xie Qingcheng pushed the menu toward He Yu.

"Are you sugaring me?"

"It's your birthday, so it's what I should do."

He Yu stared at the drink menu for a bit, and his thoughts began to turn inappropriate. Xie Qingcheng could hold his liquor, but he had a unique constitution; his body would turn weak, red, and hot when he drank. Mulling over it, He Yu felt something stir in his chest, and he quietly asked the bartender a few questions. He ordered two varieties of fruit wine that looked and tasted sweet, but packed quite a punch in their alcohol content.

The drinks were soon ready, their color exquisite and clear. Even Xie Qingcheng, who was no romantic, thought they looked beautiful.

"Try it. It's tasty—it smells like grapefruit."

Xie Qingcheng took a sip and did find it to be sweet and refreshing.

The bar's atmosphere was great. Most patrons came for the music and the old-timey vibes, with the seniors casually playing classic songs on the stage, while a girl in vintage clothing sang in Cantonese, "Do you know, I love you, I hate you, like an unstoppable river, twisting and turning, passing riverbanks, the struggle forever unresolved…"

He Yu, listening to the lyrics "Love you, hate you, did you know?" looked silently at Xie Qingcheng, who was focused on the performance, until it ended, and applause rose up around them.

It was only then that Xie Qingcheng realized He Yu was watching him. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I'm happy that you like it."

Xie Qingcheng could deal with He Yu when he was being straightforward. The word "shy" wasn't in his dictionary, but such a direct statement did make his heart tremble a little. It left him feeling a bit uneasy and pained. With the same ability he'd used to overcome psychological Ebola, he calmed himself down and said, "They played well. You should listen carefully, too."

"I used to come all the time on the weekends."

"When?"

"Oh, when I was in seventh or eighth grade."

"They let minors in?"

"I'm tall, so I could fool people if I dressed maturely. And I got a fake ID."

"……"

"There's nothing wrong with music," He Yu said. "It's not like I wanted to do anything bad. Even if I did, I wouldn't come to this type of bar for it."

"Then what did you order?"

"Nonalcoholic drinks. I'm a good boy."

Xie Qingcheng gazed at him with a half-believing look.

He Yu smiled. "Really. When you performed a physical examination, it didn't show that I drank, right?"

A strange feeling washed over Xie Qingcheng. He remembered He Yu from seventh and eighth grade. At that time, he was so meek in front of him; he might as well have had a tattoo across his face that said "excellent student." How could he have known that He Yu was just pretending to be a good person, while using a fake ID to listen to jazz music? If he'd known back then, he would have broken He Yu's legs.

Well, it was too late now. Xie Qingcheng took another sip of his drink and made no comment on He Yu's wild teenage behaviors. As they drank, one song after another was performed at the bar, every one of them a classic.

Somehow, two hours had passed before he realized it, and the bartender had refilled their drinks several times. He Yu gazed over at Xie Qingcheng in the dim, warm light, finding him slightly drunk. He looked very pretty when he was drunk, like peach blossoms that had fallen onto ice, so beautiful and breathtaking that He Yu couldn't get his fill of the view. As he stared intently at him, a commotion came from the bar counter. The band on stage was somehow ready for this—having clearly prepared beforehand, they started playing love songs.

Someone was proposing, it turned out. The couple had met at the bar, so the groom had given the band notice beforehand, and the bar ceiling opened up to dozens of colorful garlands. The twinkling confetti, shaped like the moon and stars, fell like snowflakes upon everyone's shoulders.

"Congratulations!"

"Congratulations, congratulations! May you have a long and happy marriage!"

The bar's patrons were very happy to see such a merry scene. After the groom's successful proposal, he kissed his bride, and shouted at the top of his lungs, "Drinks are on me tonight! Order anything you want!"

The mood quickly became spirited.

At first, the guests in this bar were mainly enjoying the music, every night like a small concert. But things were different tonight. The Senior Jazz Band played cheerful dance songs, and the elated groom pulled his fiancée into a dance on the ancient red tiles. The warm, happy atmosphere was contagious. People at the bar stood up from their seats in twos and threes, whether they knew how to dance or not, and turned to their companions to begin swaying to the beat.

"Rose, rose, the most beautiful. Rose, rose, the most gorgeous. Blooming on the branch in the spring and summer. Rose, rose, I love you…"

The piece was old-fashioned, but it perfectly fit the mood. Even Xie Qingcheng looked on with a faint smile in his eyes. He leaned lazily against his chair, put his chin in his hand, and watched the lively crowd.

"Blooming on the branch in the spring and summer. Rose, rose, I love you!"

Drinking had relaxed him quite a bit. The scene made Xie Qingcheng satisfied. Suddenly, though, He Yu was standing in front of him, bowing, taking his hand with a smile. "Sir, may I have this dance?"

Xie Qingcheng was drunk, but he was still quite alert. He only liked watching other people dance; he didn't want to move himself. "I don't know how to."

After a moment's thought, He Yu changed his request. "Sir, may I teach you how to dance?"

When he didn't get a response, he took that as consent and pulled him onto the dance floor.

Xie Qingcheng couldn't shake him off in front of everyone else; it would only draw more attention. And truthfully, dancing wasn't a big deal—it wasn't about who was the better dancer, but about joining the lively atmosphere. He'd seen it before in Western movies; just because he hadn't done it didn't mean he didn't know how to!

"Come on, left foot forward, then right foot… Don't worry about your hands, I'll guide you… No, wait—ow!"

Xie Qingcheng had stepped on He Yu's foot.

He frowned. "Does it hurt?"

Duh. How could it not hurt to have a six-foot man step on you? But He Yu was too embarrassed to say anything, so he shook his head and backed up a step before he continued his lesson. "Ge, left foot first, then I turn, and then your right foot."

One of his hands, intentionally or unintentionally, sat on Xie Qingcheng's waist—but he was more or less used to being with He Yu, and drunk besides, so he didn't react. He Yu's heart was pounding, and he tightened his grip. Xie Qingcheng's waist was so slim he had to fight the urge to pull him into his arms.

"Very good. Left foot, right foot, then left, right—"

Another stomp.

"…It's okay. Again."

Xie Qingcheng frowned. He hadn't thought it'd be this hard. He was just playing around at first, but once he realized he wasn't very good at it, he got

serious. He didn't just listen to what He Yu was saying, he intently observed how the talented dancers around him moved. Eventually, Professor Xie felt like he'd probably figured it out.

Very confidently, he said, "Go ahead."

He Yu found this amusing, the way he was half-drunk yet still unwilling to admit defeat, trying very hard to learn how to dance. But he couldn't show it, so he feigned calmness and gave Xie Qingcheng his arm once more, the other hand wrapped around his waist.

"Left foot, yes, very good. Step closer, right foot, and then left… Good, now right…and—"

Another stomp.

He Yu and Xie Qingcheng both fell silent. Xie Qingcheng frowned and looked at the ground with a somewhat displeased and confused expression. But he refused to give up. He Yu held it in for a while, but in the end he couldn't take it anymore. He ducked down with a sputter of laughter, and, taking advantage of the fact that Huzhou bars didn't care much about such things, he took Xie Qingcheng into his arms and put his chin on his head. He lowered his eyes and kissed Xie Qingcheng's head imperceptibly.

"All right, all right," he said. "It's okay. Ge, you're drunk."

Xie Qingcheng felt a little better after hearing this. Fine. As long as it wasn't that he wasn't smart enough, just that he drank too much and it affected his performance. But He Yu, that rascal, had ulterior motives. The alcohol he'd ordered was sweet and easy to down, but the aftereffects were strong, so Xie Qingcheng felt a bit dizzy. There was a nagging feeling that he shouldn't be doing such things with He Yu on the dance floor, and he wanted to push him away.

But He Yu was strong, and he held him gently yet impolitely. As they swayed softly to the music, a sweet voice in Xie Qingcheng's ear persuaded, "Dance with me for a little longer?"

"Dance, my ass…"

Before he could finish, He Yu led him to a more secluded area, dimmer and farther away from the crowd, where they were less likely to be noticed. There, he held Xie Qingcheng in a flirty, lingering way for a while, feeling his chest getting hotter and hotter, his desire becoming more and more insatiable. Moving to a less conspicuous angle, he forced Xie Qingcheng to lift his face into the dim lighting. He pushed him against a corner where nobody could see them, and stared closely into his eyes. The man's pupils were dark; the aftereffects of the alcohol were building up.

He Yu was almost sucked in by those eyes. "So beautiful," he whispered.

Maybe it was the atmosphere, but Xie Qingcheng's voice got quieter too. He knew He Yu was talking about him, and he didn't like being called beautiful, so he grabbed He Yu's casual pastel tie and glared at him. "Who are you talking about? I'll give you one chance."

He Yu gave a low laugh. "I'm talking about my wife." He reached down to set his hand against the dip of Xie Qingcheng's back.

Xie Qingcheng's slender fingers hooked onto his tie, pulling him closer to give him a firm slap. "I think you're still dreaming."

“If I was dreaming, we’d be in bed right now.”

His voice got quieter and quieter, so soft that his mouth was practically pressed to Xie Qingcheng’s ear. Hips swaying to the music, he got closer and closer, as if they were slow-dancing together. As they danced, his firm chest muscles would occasionally brush against the other man’s front.

“Are you tired of living?” Xie Qingcheng’s thin lips barely moved.

“I was at first, but now that I have you, I think a lifetime isn’t long enough.”

He Yu smiled, brushing his lips against the other’s time and time again, teasing at the atmosphere heating up between them. He suddenly lowered his head and began kissing him deeply. Xie Qingcheng made a sound in protest at the unexpected contact; he tried to push him away, but He Yu held his wrist tightly.

“Ge…mmph…” He kissed him, he passionately caressed him, he hugged him.

The kiss was full of a deep affection, but deeper still was the heat of lust. He Yu hadn’t been intimate with Xie Qingcheng for a long time, and the past two days had been bliss. Now, as he held his lover’s body, soft and warm after drinking, he couldn’t help but be filled with vulgar thoughts. His breathing was a little ragged as his dark eyes met Xie Qingcheng’s in the faint light. He Yu’s Adam’s apple bobbed.

“He Yu,” whispered Xie Qingcheng, sensing danger, “what are you doing now?”

He Yu leaned against him, swaying slightly to the music, rubbing their bodies together. The air between them turned heated, and their breathing became heavier. “Ge,” he crooned as he ground against him.

“I’m so thirsty…”

“…Then drink water.”

“And hot.”

“…Then take off your clothes.”

“What about after that?”

“Take a hike.”

He ignored his nonsense, and kept rubbing against him. His Adam’s apple bobbed again; he was worked up from the night before, from calling Xie Qingcheng his wife for the first time. It was quite exciting. Now, the atmosphere was just right, and he was even a little drunk, so he wouldn’t protest much. How could he help calling him his wife again a couple more times?

“Wife,” he said in a low, deep voice, “I want you to take it off with your own hands.”

“…Wife? I’m your fucking father.”

“Daddy, I want to do it with you again.”

Xie Qingcheng fell silent.

“I’m so pent-up, I want it now. I haven’t touched you in a long time—it’s been months. Yesterday wasn’t enough. I still want you. Ge, you’re so beautiful when you’re drunk, and your body is so hot… I can’t bear it anymore, I don’t want to bear it anymore. I want to fuck you now.”

Even in his stupor, Xie Qingcheng was still cold. “Don’t you dare.”

He Yu paused. His eyes seemed to become darker. He didn’t say anything else, but took a deep breath and answered with his actions whether he dared to or not. He was filled with vigor and wouldn’t go back on his word; he grabbed Xie Qingcheng’s wrist and pulled him out of the bar, straight to the hotel’s front desk, and slapped down a card.

“I want a room.”

Chapter 154:
Uncontrollable Desire

XIE QINGCHENG'S BODY was always slightly too warm after he'd been drinking, so it felt good to be inside it. Like descending into a hot spring, wrapped in heat.

He lay on the large hotel bed, his clothes disheveled and his eyes only half-open. The alcohol's effects had already gone to his head; he lifted his hands to cover his forehead and eyes, his body rhythmically swaying and shuddering in tandem with the boy thrusting on top of him. Even his fingertips were slightly flushed red.

Two consecutive days of wild sex had made his body sensitive to being fucked. His adaptability to external stimuli meant he clearly remembered the pleasure of being penetrated deeply by this young man. He Yu didn't use the condom in the drawer; he just hurriedly poured some oil over his cock for lubrication. He didn't even take off his pants. He unzipped and impatiently thrust into the hole he had already prepared with his fingers, stretching Xie Qingcheng's inner walls to their limits and beginning to fuck him eagerly. Pressing on top of him, he relentlessly thrust into Xie Qingcheng's feverishly warm body.

The damp noises of raunchy squelching echoed in the room, mingling with the creaking of the mattress, the slapping of flesh, and hoarse breathing. As He Yu fucked him, he could feel the moist, hot entrance vigorously sucking at him, yet at once resisting him as if it couldn't bear it anymore. Xie Qingcheng was beautiful. Even with the room only dimly lit with a night light, his skin looked like moonlight cast on a silk screen, emitting a faint glow.

He frowned slightly, half drunk as He Yu fucked him. His slender fingers gripped the bedsheets, and he let out broken moans as the young man thrust into him.

"Nngh…ahh…ahh…"

The fruit wine He Yu had ordered was quite strong; Xie Qingcheng's skin was becoming hotter and hotter. He Yu felt indescribably good holding him in his arms and pinning him down with his body. He took possession of this man in bed, over and over again, defiling this person who was supposed to be abstinent, who would never stay overnight in a hotel room with anyone else.

The mattress swayed, and though Xie Qingcheng was drunk, his moans were still hoarse and low. His voice leaked out with the rocking of the bed. He Yu couldn't get enough of it; he kept kissing him, kissing his neck, and when Xie Qingcheng threw his head back, showing his sensual Adam's apple, he kissed his ear and whispered, "Ge, moan louder. I love it."

Xie Qingcheng was just panting after drinking too much, so how could he listen to He Yu's cajoling? And He Yu, seeing him ignore him, increased the speed and force of his thrusts, spreading his legs and manhandling him into a side-entry position instead. He rammed forward lustfully, stimulating Xie Qingcheng's most sensitive spot with shallow, quick thrusts.

"Slow down…ah… He Yu…slower…aahhh…!"

How could the sober He Yu pity the half-drunken man in his arms? He penetrated deeply and fervently, soon making the place they connected wet. He was so deep that it was frightening, as if he might fuck him to death right here and now. He pressed in relentlessly as his hands caressed Xie Qingcheng's stomach.

"It's all the way here, so deep… Can you feel it?"

Xie Qingcheng was pushed to the edge. He shook his head, almost on the verge of a breakdown, violated again and again in his half-drunken state. His body, increasingly sensitive from the training, couldn't help but shudder slightly at He Yu's masculine possessiveness as he thrust in and out of him. The night before, He Yu had kept coming inside him and onto his face, until his hair was completely wet with sweat, hanging over his foggy eyes. His face had been smeared with a white, thick substance, his eyes as damp and red as wet peach blossoms in April.

"Ge, you're so hot… I really want to do nothing but fuck you for the rest of my life… I'll never leave your side…"

He couldn't hear any of He Yu's endearments. He was fucked until his gaze unfocused and his mind blurred. The only thing he knew was his face pressed into the sheets, He Yu plastered against him, hugging him from behind, keeping him on the bed as he rammed into him violently like a wild animal.

The bouncy mattress shook with the movement, and He Yu's length continuously stimulated the sensitive spot within him. Overwhelming pleasure surged up in waves. He tried to come back to his senses several times, but he was firmly trapped between the soft mattress and the hard, hot man behind him. The bed became a web of lust, shaking fiercely as it enveloped him. He Yu pushed him deeper into the pillow every time, and the relentless passion made Xie Qingcheng almost lose his breath.

"Slow down…" He couldn't help but hoarsely whisper. "He Yu…ah…slow down…nngh…"

He'd been fucked to the edge of a meltdown. More and more fluids dripped from the place where they connected, flowing down his thighs and leaving a large wet patch on the sheets…

The sopping noises of skin slapping skin were extremely obscene; in the depths of Xie Qingcheng's mind, he thought it was outlandish. But he couldn't ignore the fact that every time He Yu penetrated him, his sexual stimulation reached new heights, and his entrance involuntarily constricted to please the young man's cock. His prostate was numb and tingled almost painfully. It terrified him that once he no longer felt disgusted by this, and his body became more used to He Yu's intrusion, he was able to feel unprecedented pleasure from these homosexual acts. His hips began to rock rhythmically along with He Yu's fervent thrusts.

And this time, even though he was only being fucked, albeit fiercely…when the young man assaulted his prostate to the point of climax, he got hard. Xie Qingcheng was someone who rarely felt embarrassed about sex, but this made his eyes turn red with shame. He tried his hardest not to let He Yu notice his body's reaction, but this dream was immediately shattered—He Yu's hand reached around, as if he'd expected this, and grabbed his swollen cock.

"Ahh…"

"Does it feel good? Ge?"

He Yu fondled him as he thrust.

"It feels good, doesn't it…?"

The boy panted softly beside him. His hot breaths, laden with desire, brushed past Xie Qingcheng's ears. His cock quickly hardened, and clear, silver threads of precome oozed from the top.

"Ge…come for me…" He Yu's palm was wet with love juice, and he stroked Xie Qingcheng's hardness vigorously, tempting him like the devil enticing Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit. "You like it when I fuck you, don't you? You're so hard when I fuck you. I want you to come… Ge, come for me, okay…?"

Xie Qingcheng's peach-blossom eyes opened, red and moist, his pupils unfocused. He didn't want to indulge himself on He Yu's command, but as he was beset from in front and behind at once, the pleasure built quickly and to terrifying heights. He Yu was skilled at both jerking him off and thrusting into him from behind. He couldn't bear it for long, and soon came onto the boy's palm with a tremulous shudder.

"Ah…aaahhh…" Xie Qingcheng nearly collapsed from the powerless feeling of being both invaded and manhandled by another man. He pressed his sweaty forehead against the sheets, not wanting He Yu to see his expression when he came. He Yu lowered his head, lapping at Xie Qingcheng's earlobe with his tongue before he suddenly dipped in, licking into the sensitive opening.

His eyes widened. Such intense stimulation was almost too much for him to bear; it felt like he was being electrified, and his entire body trembled. The ceaseless spasms of his passage as he came made He Yu curse softly in pleasure.

"Fuck…"

When Xie Qingcheng came, He Yu started thrusting even more forcefully, ramming into him fiercely and squeezing the tight curve of Xie Qingcheng's ass. Low, erotic moans were forced out of the man's throat.

"It feels so good…Xie Qingcheng… You know what? You're only fit to be fucked by men… You're so tight…ah…" He Yu's hands were covered with come; as he narrowed his eyes, enjoying Xie Qingcheng's convulsions, the thrusts of his waist became more vehement and animalistic.

"Ah…ahh…"

"I'll fuck you to death…you slut…" He Yu had abandoned any care for manners in bed, spouting obscene things with bloodshot eyes as he plowed into the man in his arms to his heart's content. "Why are you so sexy in bed… Do the women who like you know that I fuck you like this? You're even wetter than they would be…"

"Stop talking…fucker… Stop it… Ahh!"

The young man responded by thrusting even harder, like he wanted to leave a mark, like a wild beast declaring its territory. As He Yu shot his thick semen into him countless times, Xie Qingcheng's nails tore through the bedding, and his voice took on a fragile sob. "Ah… He Yu… He Yu… There's too much… Stop coming… Stop thrusting… Ah! …Ahh…"

The boy's eyes darkened and the mattress shuddered fiercely—rhythmically—in response. His hand wrapped around Xie Qingcheng's waist, forbidding his escape. For a moment, Xie Qingcheng knew that as a husband, he hadn't been good

enough to Li Ruoqiu. Even on their wedding night, he had never made love so passionately with a woman. But He Yu seemed to want him pregnant, and fucked him like crazy. Making his hole cling to his dick, letting him come, over and over again… Just like that, they continued coupling as if they had gone mad.

Having sex was different from making love; with a powerful love, the man wouldn't be able to resist his natural desire to conceive with another person—the primitive instinct of an animal. Even though he knew it was impossible, He Yu still stubbornly treated him that way, as if wanting to leave his mark on the other's body no matter what.

"Ge, you belong to me…" The boy kept plunging into Xie Qingcheng, the two of them madly entwined. As he thrust fiercely for the last time and spilled into his soft depths, Xie Qingcheng was so stirred up that his entire body trembled and shook. His hole clung to the cock that was pressed against his deepest, most sensitive spot, filling him with spend. He was hard, too, as the young man cried out, "I'm the only one who can fuck you!"

"Ah…He Yu…aaahhh!" As He Yu pushed into him and came inside again, Xie Qingcheng yelled himself hoarse without realizing as he teared up and his mind went blank. When he finally came back to his senses, not only was he clamping down on He Yu's cock from behind, but he was also coming from the front uncontrollably. He couldn't believe it. His body shook… He had actually climaxed again just from He Yu's penetration. This time, He Yu hadn't even needed to touch him for him to come… He lay on the disheveled bed, gasping for breath, as he tried to hide his shame, his loss of control.

But He Yu had already seen everything, and he was aroused again. Frenzied with passion, he held Xie Qingcheng, his body hot and red, and kissed him happily. For some reason, he began to cry.

"Xie Qingcheng…tell me… You like me… You like me back, right…? You look so beautiful when you come for me… Xie Qingcheng…you'll be mine and mine alone forever… I can't live without you…"

Xie Qingcheng didn't hear this last line. He couldn't bear the intense stimulation, and when fucked to climax this time, he twitched and convulsed. Finally, his consciousness faded, and he passed out, thoroughly fucked by this energetic twenty-year-old young man on a large hotel bed.

His entire body was sore when he woke up the next morning. The first thing Xie Qingcheng saw when he opened his eyes was the opulent ceiling and bedposts of the hotel suite.

The fragmented memories of last night crashed back into his head, mixed with the pain of a hangover. Recalling those kinds of deeds no longer came as a shock to him, but when he sat up, he felt wretched. What the fuck was he doing? How could he have been so befuddled as to let He Yu fool him last night and book a hotel room?

Xie Qingcheng recalled how loud he had been after he'd drunk too much. Luckily, the hotel had great soundproofing, or the guests in the next room over would have come and banged on the door and cursed them out. As he thought, the sound of the hair dryer in the bathroom stopped.

This time, He Yu had gotten up earlier than him; he'd taken a shower and was about to order room service. As he walked over, tousling his hair with a towel, he saw that Xie Qingcheng had woken up and put a shirt on, and was sitting on the bed expressionlessly.

He Yu felt a bit terrified, seeing him like this.

He was somewhat traumatized by this man; every time they fucked, Xie Qingcheng would become hostile the next morning, tossing out typical scumbag lines like "That shouldn't have happened" or "You're out of your mind," before turning and walking away. Terrified that Xie Qingcheng would say something cold to him again, he immediately went over, lowered his head, and covered his mouth before Xie Qingcheng could open it.

A kiss full of passion, deep and meaningful. He Yu wanted to incinerate the cruel words that might tumble out with the fires of love. When the fierce kiss ended, they were both lightly panting. He Yu's eyes were slightly red. "Ge, what…were you going to say to me?"

Xie Qingcheng was about to speak, but He Yu was once again afraid to hear it. He lowered his lashes and kissed him again. Xie Qingcheng was speechless.

When they separated, their lips were both wet. "Just say what you want to say," He Yu said. "I won't stop you."

"I think…"

He Yu kissed him again.

Xie Qingcheng was at a loss for words.

"What did you want to say?"

There was no desire to say anything this time.

He didn't open his mouth, so He Yu didn't do anything and just sat next to the bed, quietly staring at him. How could Xie Qingcheng not know what he was doing? He was afraid now that he'd acted out again. Xie Qingcheng gazed at him, feeling somewhat uneasy, but trying to stay calm. For a moment, he was unsettled; he had never felt like this before. Previously, he'd only ever thought to avoid him, reject him, or reason with him, telling him it was impossible, even if they were highly compatible during sex. They still couldn't be together.

Surely a smart person like He Yu would choose to retreat when faced with such difficulties. But this smart person seemed to have lost his mind, ramming his head against those difficulties again and again until he bled, never looking back. As soon as he got near, the little devil would lift his blood-soaked head again and say, "Xie Qingcheng, I like you."

Xie Qingcheng's heart seemed to have cracked open slightly from the continuous, unrelenting beating. It felt as though He Yu had put something into that crack, and he didn't know what it was. At first, he hadn't cared at all. But after they escaped from the sea of fire in the basement of Zhilong Entertainment, that something seemed to have grown, and it began to stir restlessly in his chest. Xie Qingcheng felt uncomfortable. That thing pierced his heart, and it hurt.

He didn't like being this way, but he'd never felt like this before—his heart so uncontrollable because of just one person. It was dangerous, and painful, and made him uneasy. He wanted to frown, pick up a cold scalpel, and cut it out. To ruthlessly excise it, like removing an appendix, removing a tumor, removing

damaged tissues, so it couldn't affect him anymore. But by the time he discovered its existence, it had already started worming deeper into his heart.

He couldn't remove his heart, after all.

Xie Qingcheng was confused by all this. His expression was indifferent, but he didn't say anything vicious that would hurt He Yu, as he had before.

When he didn't say anything more, He Yu breathed a sigh of relief, but he didn't dare take it for granted. He looked cautiously at Xie Qingcheng's warm lips, and it was a long time before he spoke up.

"Ge, I'll order some room service," he said at last. "Um…what do you want to eat?"

Overwhelmed and exhausted, Xie Qingcheng lay back onto the bed and covered his forehead with his hand. "Anything," he said hoarsely.

So He Yu ordered breakfast for two. He preferred an English breakfast himself, but that wasn't to Xie Qingcheng's taste; so he ordered some Huzhou-style chicken soup wontons and a bowl of century egg and lean meat congee instead. The hotel's dining cart was pushed in and delivered to the suite's bedroom door before He Yu sent the employee back. He didn't want anyone else to see Xie Qingcheng like this, unwittingly exuding an erotic, mature aura after a night of passion.

"Come on, get up and eat some," He Yu coaxed gently as he brought the bowl to the bedside.

Xie Qingcheng didn't expect to be coaxed into eating breakfast by a kid at his age. He felt it was unnatural. He stood up with a dreary expression, but there was no serious pain besides his aching waist and legs. He'd passed out drunk last night, so He Yu had gone to the bathroom for a hot, wet towel and wiped him down carefully, cleaning him up without finding the task tedious. Xie Qingcheng did get the feeling that he must have acted up a few more times after he took care of him, but, well, at least he had taken some measures.

Xie Qingcheng didn't know if He Yu's actions were barbaric or civilized. He didn't really want to think of such things anymore, though, so he sat up to eat something and regain his energy. But He Yu held onto the spoon and didn't let it go.

"What is it?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

"I can feed you…"

"More like I should feed you."

To his consternation, He Yu actually sat down. "Okay, then feed me."

He was rendered speechless. Shameless people were unmatched in this world.

"Feed me," He Yu repeated.

Xie Qingcheng wasn't going to do that, of course. "Is your arm broken? You need someone to feed you? Eat your own food."

He Yu's English breakfast was still on the table outside, but he was in no hurry to consume it. He just stared as Xie Qingcheng drank his porridge and ate his wontons. He looked very handsome as he ate, taking small bites with the spoon and making almost no noise. He Yu could slightly see his snow-white teeth and the tip of his warm tongue. While Xie Qingcheng was finishing a spoonful of porridge, he held the spoon in his mouth. He Yu felt his heart twitch. He gulped.

"…If you're hungry, go eat," said Xie Qingcheng. "Why are you just watching me?"

"I want to try yours too." He had started to talk nonsense.

Suspecting that he wouldn't leave if he didn't get a taste of it, Xie Qingcheng handed him the spoon and the bowl. The hotel's century egg and lean meat porridge was very thick; the white rice and fresh meat were stewed into a bowl with century eggs and shredded ginger. The chef was skilled, but when He Yu took a bite, he said, "Yours is better."

Xie Qingcheng arched an eyebrow. The little devil was good at flattery. People who cooked liked to hear such words. After a meal, whoever ate the most would be the one who'd made the cook the happiest.

"Can I try the chicken soup wontons?" He Yu asked.

Xie Qingcheng lifted his chin and motioned him to take it.

The Huzhou chef at this hotel was quite meticulous when making wontons. The wrappers were freshly made, and there wasn't too much filling. This had nothing to do with being stingy; rather, too much meat would make the wonton look bloated and crude. The small Huzhou wontons were meant to float; the wrapper should drift through the hot water like mist, with steam rising from the broth and creating a dreamy cloudscape in the bowl.

The chicken broth was rich in flavor, but it needed to be strained into a clear soup with no oil or heavy scraps lest it weigh down the light wontons. The soup was clear and the filling was thin, with a handful of finely chopped green onions, shredded seaweed, and some shredded egg as garnish. It was the most appetizing traditional snack in Huzhou. As an employee of one of the oldest hotels on the Bund, the chef had to be at the pinnacle of artistic skill.

"It's still not as good as the one I had at your house," He Yu said.

Xie Qingcheng snorted. "Picky." But he was a paternal man; he did enjoy the praise. "Where's the vinegar?" It was his turn to eat the wontons, so he was looking for vinegar.

"It's outside on the table. I'll go get it."

Xie Qingcheng poured a lot of vinegar into the bowl. He Yu felt his teeth ache at the sight, a ghastly, sour taste in his mouth.

"Why are you adding so much?"

"How can I eat wontons without enough vinegar?" Xie Qingcheng took a bite. Still finding it too bland, he added more.

After a moment of thought, He Yu started acting up again. "Xie Qingcheng, you're so good at eating sour things." Xie Qingcheng gave him a look. "If only you could become sour with jealousy over me."

His response was to hand him the vinegar bottle and say, "Put it back."

When he finished eating, Xie Qingcheng looked at the time and realized he ought to get back to school. He still had two classes at around three o'clock that afternoon, so he began to get ready to leave the bed. Their banter—and the fact that he'd received no clear rejection from Xie Qingcheng—had relaxed He Yu. But when he saw that Xie Qingcheng was about to put on pants, an alarm went off in his head. Stepping forward, He Yu did something ridiculous. He pinned down Xie

Qingcheng's hand, which was about to buckle his belt.

"What are you doing?" Xie Qingcheng asked.

He Yu didn't say anything.

"Let go."

Still, He Yu was silent.

"He Yu, I'm telling you to let go." This rascal was inscrutable. Why wasn't he letting him put on his pants?

"You…" He Yu couldn't say anything because of his pride, but it was too uncomfortable to keep it in. He was anxious, but he couldn't say it. Only after a long while did he ask with a pale face, "A-after you put on your pants, are you going to turn away and refuse to acknowledge me?"

It was Xie Qingcheng's turn to be speechless.

What was he talking about? It wasn't like his pants were magic. What did they have to do with acknowledging him? He Yu knew this, of course, but he just wanted to be with Xie Qingcheng too much. When a person wanted something too much, they would start thinking strange, unreasonable things.

In a muffled voice, He Yu said, "You were always like that before. You were fine in bed, but once you got out of it, you'd start preaching at me…and I'm not going to listen."

Seeing his stubborn, earnest expression, Xie Qingcheng felt his heart throb again. He even found himself thinking—if He Yu were a girl, what would their relationship be now? But the idea was absurd. If He Yu were a girl, this kind of thing would probably never have happened between them. And even if he were, could he ever have a good ending in his current situation? Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes.

He felt like he was descending into depravity with He Yu, and he knew it was wrong. Faced with those pleading eyes, though, he felt an inappropriate shred of pity and hesitation. Xie Qingcheng wasn't sure how to react, how to handle such an unfamiliar feeling.

In the end, he said, "Let go. I won't preach at you."

"Then will you acknowledge me? Will you take accountability?"

Xie Qingcheng grit his teeth—he didn't know if it was himself or He Yu he hated anymore. "I recognize it."

"Really?"

"I do. I'll take accountability by paying at the front desk."

"…I've already paid that," said He Yu, disappointed that Xie Qingcheng had deliberately misunderstood him.

Surprisingly, his response made Xie Qingcheng furious. "He Yu, we're all grown men here, so why the fuck should I always let you pay for the room?"

He Yu's reply was instinctive. "Because you're the one who got—" Halfway through, his mind finally caught up with his mouth and stopped him.

But Xie Qingcheng's eyes had already narrowed. "I'm the one who got what?"

I can't say "You're the one who got fucked all night long, so you're the one who lost out," right?

He changed tack. "B-because you're the one who got the sheets dirty, you can pay for the bedding. Is that okay?"

Xie Qingcheng's expression turned even uglier. He turned back to look at the ruined linens. They were more than just dirty—they had been practically torn to pieces. Thinking of last night's events, he didn't say anything else, just lowered his eyes and put on his clothes, one by one. He truly hated himself right now. He didn't know why he'd lost control like that—why he kept making so many damn mistakes.

Truthfully, Xie Qingcheng had never been like this before. He was excellent at controlling himself. As soon as something touched his bottom line, he could cut his losses immediately and deal with it properly. But He Yu was like a virus that had broken through his firewall. He was getting messed up from the inside out. He knew he shouldn't be like this.

After much delay, they finally went downstairs to check out.

There were a lot of people in the lobby at this time of day. Some people had no sense of boundaries and liked to get close to other people when they were checking out, intentionally or unintentionally invading their privacy. It was an extremely awkward process for Xie Qingcheng and He Yu. Though the people at the front desk were well trained and quiet, never saying anything they shouldn't, the other guests had questionable manners. People were wandering around, glancing at their receipt. Compensation for bedding. Lube…

"Tsk…"

He Yu turned around to coldly glare at the patron who had the nerve to utter "tsk" after peeping at other people's business; they turned their eyes away awkwardly, pretending as if they hadn't seen it. After they'd checked out, the doorman came to ask to where they would like to take their taxi.

"We'll take a taxi to Huzhou Medical first," He Yu said, "then Huzhou University."

Xie Qingcheng looked at him in surprise. He hadn't thought he would want to go back to school so quickly.

He Yu smiled, embarrassed. "Ge, I have classes in the afternoon too. If I skip again, I won't pass. I'll come find you later."

"Pay attention in class."

While they walked toward the hotel's side door, another pair of guests who were checking out walked out from the elevator. Standing with their backs to the lobby, they didn't see them at all. The couple looked very intimate. The girl held her boyfriend's arm as she walked with him, talking and laughing. These two were—

Xie Xue and Wei Dongheng!

Wei Dongheng had just come back from the northwest yesterday. At first, the work his father had assigned him wasn't going to be completed until August of that year. But when the playboy unexpectedly fell in love with Xie Xue, he finished all of his work in mid-May. His father thought it was interesting—that scoundrel son of his would work this hard for a girl? He wanted to test him again, so he gave him some new assignments.

Wei Dongheng didn't care much at first, and he'd planned on finishing the work as early as he did before to rebel against his father. But then he received news that Xie Xue was ill.

While in the army, he wasn't able to use his cell phone a lot, and Xie Xue was the kind of person who only ever told him the good news. He had no idea what had happened in Huzhou. So how had Xie Xue's illness reached his ears? It was thanks to Commissar Wang, of course. Commissar Wang and Wei Dongheng's family were in frequent contact. When the old commissar flew back to Yanzhou after supervising the Huang Zhilong incident, he called Wei Dongheng's father and informed him that Chen Man was almost taken hostage.

When he talked about Chen Man being in the hospital, he mentioned that a girl was also caught up in the matter and had been hospitalized alongside him, and Wei Dongheng had happened to overhear the exchange. He was so agitated he started an argument with his father immediately. He quit working and insisted on returning to Huzhou; his father had nothing to hold over his head, since his son had finished all the work he was assigned ahead of time. There was nothing he could do but let Wei Dongheng leave the northwest earlier than scheduled.

He was surprised to find that upon his return, Xie Xue had already made a full recovery and was discharged from the hospital. The two of them had been spending all of their free time together since. Thanks to how close He Yu had been sticking to Xie Qingcheng, keeping him thoroughly distracted, he'd never noticed that his younger sister had been acting strangely since getting discharged, or that she was almost never around, seemingly very busy.

Wei Dongheng, the little ruffian, might have looked like a scoundrel when he was a child, but he had an artistic side to him—he also quite liked this historic hotel. There were a lot of hotels in Huzhou that were even more luxurious, but like He Yu, Wei Dongheng always chose this one when he was with someone he liked. And it was a coincidence that their room was right next to He Yu and Xie Qingcheng's. If not for the excellent soundproofing of the walls, the voices of brother and sister right beside each other could have been heard the whole night…

"Give me a moment. I'll sign the receipt," Wei Dongheng said to Xie Xue. "There's an ice cream shop in the lobby, so you can go get an ice cream and eat it there."

"What flavor do you like?" she asked.

"No thanks," he said, acting haughty and staunch. "I don't like eating that kind of girly dessert."

Amused by his antics, Xie Xue ran to the shop to buy the sweetest flavor for him. Half of the ice cream shop was inside the hotel, and the other half looked out to the street. While she waited for the employee to scoop her ice cream cone, she casually glanced outside…

Only to see He Yu and Xie Qingcheng exiting the hotel and getting into a taxi. He Yu even steadied Xie Qingcheng with a suggestive hand on his waist.

Her eyes widened in shock.

Chapter 155:
Get Your Mind Out of the Gutter

WHEN XIE XUE returned to the hotel lobby, she was still a little bewildered.

She couldn't believe what she'd seen. She must have made a mistake. She only saw them from the back… Could it have been a pair of look-alikes? She returned to the front desk, ice cream cones in hand. Wei Dongheng was still settling the bill for the items they'd used from the room, so Xie Xue sat down on the sofa in the waiting area in a daze. A pair of guests were chatting next to her.

"Man, there are so many gay guys nowadays…"

"Huh?"

"Didn't you see the two handsome dudes just now? Ah, they were so good-looking. Can't believe they're in that kinda relationship!"

"How'd you know?"

"I saw it! Their receipt had condoms and lube—it was crazy! They even had to pay for ruining the bedding!"

"God…I couldn't tell at all. Looked like there was some serious age gap, too. And here I thought they were just coworkers…"

"Coworkers my ass! They got a room to do that stuff! Tsk tsk tsk, I'd never expect to see that shit. Crazy, man…"

As Xie Xue listened, she felt even more unsettled. Thinking of the two figures she'd seen gave her goosebumps. She was mistaken, probably. Her older brother had been married before, and He Yu was only twenty years old—her own student, still a freshman in college. How could they do such a thing…?

"What's wrong?" Wei Dongheng walked over after signing the bill, shocked to see her pale face. "What happened? Are you feeling unwell? I'll take you to the hospital."

"I-I'm fine," she said haltingly.

"Are you sure?" He held her hand, and became even more nervous. "Your hand's so cold."

"I just made a full recovery. How could I get sick again?" Xie Xue came back to her senses and comforted him, handing him one of the ice creams. "Here, for you."

Wei Dongheng had said that he didn't want to eat such girly things, but since she bought it for him, he still took it. He stared at her for a bit, before a sudden thought popped into his head and he exclaimed, "Y-you're not pregnant, are you?!"

"What?!" She scolded him. "How long have you been back for? And we've taken precautions—do you have any common sense?"

But he was agitated now. "Accidents happen! Why don't we go to the women's health clinic…"

Xie Xue was in no mood to talk about this.

After she'd started dating Wei Dongheng, she realized that though he looked like a hooligan, he truly was just a silly guy. His thoughts were much shallower than the innocent-looking He Yu's, and the things he said were often ridiculous.

But her mind was full of the conversation she overheard and the shocking scene she'd witnessed. When she and Wei Dongheng got into the taxi, ready to get back to school, she couldn't hold back her anxiety anymore.

"Wei Dongheng."

"Hmm?"

"In all the world, do you think there might be two people who look almost identical from the back?"

Wei Dongheng was still wondering if she was pregnant. He blinked in surprise before he replied, "Why do you ask that?"

After a moment's thought, she told him what she'd seen and heard.

He surprised her by bursting into laughter. "How is that possible? Your brother and He Yu? I know He Yu pretty well—he's pretentious, he acts like a princess, and his standards are so high. How could he fall for a divorced thirty-something…"

She hit him before he could finish. "What the hell are you saying?"

"Ah, I'm not saying anything bad about our brother." Wei Dongheng was very upright sometimes. "But it's the truth. Everyone in our circle knows that Young Master He is extremely finicky—his mother even more so. If he's going to be picking a wife, he'd be choosing from Danish princesses and British queens—"

She laughed, her anxiety lifting. "There you go with your nonsense again."

"Is that all you were worried about? Of course you were mistaken. If you're only seeing them from the back, it's very easy to mix people up, so don't overthink it," he said. "Believe me. I don't know your brother well, but that jerk He Yu is famously straight. He doesn't mess around with men."

Xie Xue felt a bit better. After some thought, she asked, "When you're looking for a wife, what type would you pick?"

Wei Dongheng rolled his eyes. What a dangerous question. Did she think he was stupid? After a speechless moment, his tone turned serious. "Speaking of which, there's something I'd like to discuss with you…"

Ten minutes later, Xie Xue got out of the car, dizzy, her ears ringing.

She hadn't thought Wei Dongheng would want her to meet his parents so soon, or that he planned to get married before he graduated. He told her that he'd already informed his whole family about this; his father had transferred him to the northwest to test his resolve. Xie Xue, on the other hand, had never dared to tell Xie Qingcheng, which made Wei Dongheng feel a bit wronged. Men and women were expected to get married when they were old enough, and he and Xie Xue were both of marriageable age. Why should they have to sneak around like thieves just to date?

They were almost at their destination. Wei Dongheng hadn't returned to the dorms yet, and he didn't want people to see him step foot onto campus, so he got out of the taxi two streets before Huzhou University. Before they exited the car, he was still muttering about when Xie Xue would tell Xie Qingcheng about them

dating.

"The main thing is that…wh-when you were younger, your image…in my brother's eyes… It's really not that great."

Wei Dongheng was annoyed at himself, too. "If I knew things would turn out like this, I wouldn't have tried to fight him!"

Thinking back on it, Xie Xue laughed. "You brought a whole group of people to fight him, and even though he beat up everyone else till they cried, you never admitted defeat."

"That's right. I think he should respect me a little just for that." Remembering it made him feel better. The car rolled to a temporary stop, and Wei Dongheng got out. "Go back to school first. I'll talk to you more when we have dinner tonight."

Talk about what? Talk about revealing everything to Xie Qingcheng? She was frightened just thinking about it…

During her walk to the staff dorms, her mind whirled with thoughts. As she was passing by the track field, though, a car suddenly opened its doors behind her. A woman ran out and called, "Hey, you're Xie Xue, right?"

Xie Xue came back to her senses and turned around. Looking at the plump woman in front of her, she felt she was somewhat familiar. "And you are…"

The woman took off her sunglasses, her red lips twisting in an arrogant smile. "You don't recognize me, but I recognize you. It's no surprise you don't remember me, since we haven't seen each other in a long time—I'm He Yu's mother. I have something I want to talk to you about, so how about it? Let's go to a café?"

Xie Xue was puzzled, but she agreed.

Lü Zhishu drove around in circles for a while and brought her to a high-end café in the center of the city.

"Young lady." Lü Zhishu's face was like a cheap mask made of balloons, her greasy smile pushing up her cheeks. "Order anything you want."

Looking at the menu, Xie Xue thought everything was far too expensive, so she ordered the cheapest herbal tea.

"Auntie, what did you want to talk about?"

Lü Zhishu studied her with a smile. "I thought you'd know why I invited you out for tea alone," she said sweetly. "Do you really not know?"

"I don't," said Xie Xue, confused. "Auntie, did you want to ask about He Yu's performance in classes last year?"

Lü Zhishu leaned back, her thick eyelids drooping. "No, Miss Xie. I have something else to ask. Don't worry—as long as you cooperate with me, I won't disclose your relationship with a student to your school."

"You—!" Xie Xue was aghast. She wasn't Wei Dongheng's teacher, she hadn't taught his classes before, and she was only an intern while he was a senior, but she was still shocked to hear Lü Zhishu say such a thing. "How do you—"

"I'm the CEO of a large company; obviously I have the channels to obtain such information."

In her surprise and fury, Xie Xue's face turned red. "Auntie, that's a private matter. What right do you have to look into my private affairs?"

“Privacy?”

Xie Xue thought Lü Zhishu was talking about Wei Dongheng, but to Lü Zhishu, Xie Xue’s reaction confirmed she had relations with He Yu.

Lü Zhishu sneered, dropping the act. “What privacy? You have the nerve to speak about privacy in front of me? Let me put it this way: Miss Xie, you’re quite pretty, but you should remember your origins. You and I, you and him—we’re not from the same class at all. Cinderella’s story is just for entertainment, and you should wake up and not waste your precious youth.”

Xie Xue could have never expected He Yu’s mother would say such things to her. She was so shocked she forgot to retort.

Lü Zhishu felt incomprehensible disgust toward Xie Xue, a girl who came from an ordinary family but was doing well for herself. Especially since the girl seemed so innocent, kind, and flawless—she just used that to her advantage, to attract men’s attention, and Lü Zhishu found this even more annoying. “Since you’re teaching, you should tone it down and do your job well instead of thinking about finding a rich guy to marry and climb the social ladder. As a girl, do you not understand self-respect? Having sex before marriage—do you not think it shameful? Where is your dignity? And do you really think it’s realistic to marry him considering your circumstances?”

After a brief pause, she continued in an arrogant tone, “Miss Xie, doing such things while you’re simply dating… Have you ever thought about how your future husband might look at you? Your first time wasn’t with your husband, which means you’re damaged goods now. I’m telling you honestly—families like ours pay a lot of attention to whether or not their daughters-in-law are pure. We’re alone here, so I’ll put it clearly. It doesn’t matter if your relationship is good. Do you think you’re clean right now?”

Xie Xue had a good temper, but hearing this made her furious.

This woman was crazy. It was 2021, and she was talking about how people who had sex while dating were unclean and damaged goods? And she was even talking about their class difference—was she going to throw her a check for ten million and ask her to scram? Xie Xue was so upset that she was trembling… But when she thought it through, a terrifying notion came to her.

“How do you know that we—you’ve been following me?”

“You know perfectly well what you did with him in the car.” Lü Zhishu’s voice was cold.

“I-in the car? Wait…” Xie Xue was perplexed. “Who are you talking about?”

“Miss Xie, what a funny question. I’m He Yu’s mother; who do you think I’m talking about?”

“He Yu? …He Yu?” As realization dawned, Xie Xue was torn between anger and amusement. “Executive Lü, you’re accusing the wrong person!”

“What, you refuse to admit it now?”

“Why would I? There’s nothing between your son and I! I thought you were talking about my boyfriend—I was wondering what sort of family relations you and my boyfriend might have,” she answered angrily. “Don’t bother with your advice. I don’t like your son’s type at all, and I don’t know where you heard whatever rumor made you think I’m with your son. I don’t know who she is, but I pity the girl who’s

stuck with a mother-in-law like you!”

Lü Zhishu’s face darkened. Seeing Xie Xue grab her purse, about to leave, she stopped her and demanded, “Xie Xue, are you really telling me the truth? You and He Yu have been close since you were young. If it’s not you, then—”

“Are you crazy?! Closeness means we’re getting married? Are you a relic from the Qin Dynasty? Friendship doesn’t exist to you?” Her patience had reached its limit. Anyone getting pestered like this for no good reason would lose it, and her eyes blazed. “Do you really think your son is a British prince? That all the women in the world want to date him? Let go!”

He Yu’s mother still thought it was impossible. This girl and He Yu were childhood friends. He Yu had bought condoms several times at Huzhou University, but she hadn’t heard that he was close to any other female classmates from school. “Then who’s your boyfriend?” she asked.

“None of your damn—”

“I’m her boyfriend.”

In the chaos, a deep voice sounded from behind them.

Startled, Xie Xue turned around to see Wei Dongheng glaring furiously at Lü Zhishu. “President Lü, do you have any advice for me?”

Chapter 156:
Your Secret

NOW THAT Wei Dongheng had appeared to confirm his relationship with Xie Xue, Lü Zhishu no longer doubted her.

Her face turned white, then green, and she stared at Wei Dongheng and Xie Xue for a long time with a complicated expression. She wanted to say something, but found that she was in no position to say anything at all. In the end, she just awkwardly muttered a "sorry," grabbed her alligator purse, and ran away.

Xie Xue was still upset with her, but at the same time, she thought it was strange that Wei Dongheng was here. "How did you know I was here?" she asked.

"I saw you in her car on the road," he replied. "I thought it was weird, so I followed."

"She was really weird. I thought she wanted me to do something, but I didn't think it'd be about something so ridiculous."

He ordered a cup of coffee and had her sit down to calm her anger. "Like I said, the He family is full of weirdos. Especially Lü Zhishu. She's really hard to deal with." His eyebrows lifted, and he took the opportunity to show off a bit. "Unlike my family, who are very open-minded. I heard there was only one distantly related cousin that was a bit strange…but she's already passed away. Now, my family is full of cuties like me. When I was a kid, they'd even forgive me for acting out, so they'd never say such awful things to you."

It took a long time for Xie Xue to recover and start feeling a little better.

"She seemed really sure that He Yu was dating someone," she mused. "I wonder which unlucky girl it is…" She suddenly remembered the scene at the hotel, where a taxi was picking up two passengers, and a sliver of uneasiness rose in her heart again.

Wei Dongheng could tell what she was thinking, and scratched at his buzz cut—his father had ordered him to shave the ruffian-style silver hair he was so proud of, so he had an army-appropriate hairstyle now. It hadn't grown back yet, and he hadn't had time to dye it again. "If you're really worried, why don't you call your brother and ask if he went to that hotel today?"

She thought on it for a bit, and eventually she decided to call. A few rings later, Xie Qingcheng's calm, steady voice came through the phone.

"Hello."

"Ge, wh-what are you up to?"

"Preparing for class. You need something?"

"Oh…" Xie Xue let out a sigh of relief. She immediately covered the phone and exaggeratedly mouthed to Wei Dongheng: He's. Preparing. For. Class.

Wei Dongheng snapped his fingers, crossed his legs, and began to sway proudly, as if saying "I told you so."

"Nothing, I just called to ask."

Xie Qingcheng thought this was strange of her, but his younger sister had always done a lot of weird things. A sudden phone call to ask about him wasn't uncommon, so he didn't press her on it. He chatted with her for a bit before hanging up.

"Whew—" She breathed another sigh of relief.

Looking at her, amused, Wei Dongheng teased, "Are you not worried that your brother started preparing for class after he got back?"

"Impossible. My brother takes a long time to prepare, so he couldn't have been downtown today." That worry assuaged, she rolled her eyes and grumbled about Lü Zhishu again, "He Yu's mother is seriously insane. I don't know which classmate He Yu is dating, but if his mother finds out, she'll be in trouble. I really hope it's not a student in my class…"

Xie Qingcheng hadn't been distracted by Xie Xue's sudden call. He prepared for his class, rushing to get the slides ready ahead of time. Once his two classes were over, he went to the convenience store on campus to buy some oden, then went back to his dorm to take a break. When he got to the door of the building, he suddenly felt dizzy. He leaned against the cold metal door for a long while before he finally recovered.

In response to this sudden discomfort, the first thing he did when he walked through the door was boil water to take some medicine. But when he opened the drawer, he found that he was completely out. He stood there, stupefied, for a few seconds. He'd been too careless—not only did he fail to take his medicine on time for two days in a row, but he even forgot that he had just run out.

Pressing a hand to his forehead, he leaned against the alcohol cabinet, rubbing his temples and reflecting on the past few days. Perhaps it wasn't just He Yu who had gone overboard and overindulged. He had, too. He'd always been a fastidious person, but now he was hanging out with a young, frivolous kid, even forgetting his own illness. The thought made that anxious, irritable feeling rise up again. He closed his eyes.

The dizziness didn't go away, so finally, Xie Qingcheng had to get up, put on his coat, and take a taxi to Meiyu Private Hospital.

"This is your detailed lab report from this visit, and this is your medicine."

In the director's office, Qin Ciyan's former colleague pushed a piece of paper and two cartons of medicine toward Xie Qingcheng.

"You can look at the lab results yourself. I don't need to explain them to you."

Xie Qingcheng took the report, as calmly as he would any other patient's. He looked through it in its entirety.

"The situation is worse than I thought," he said.

"If you had stopped taking RN-13 earlier, things wouldn't have turned out this way."

He lit a cigarette, took a drag, and didn't say anything for a long time. "How much longer do you think I have?"

"If you were willing to go to the United States for treatment, with their current technology, you'd still have hope. But—"

“But you know I won’t.”

The director sighed heavily. “If you don’t stay in the hospital and receive proper treatment, five or six years. Your internal organs are rapidly failing; at this rate, the longest you have is six years. I’m sure you know that yourself.”

“…What if I increase how often I come for injections?”

“Xiao-Xie, it will be excruciating,” the director said, looking straight at him. “You know what the effective dosage is, and the pain from your current dose is already a thousand times worse than chemotherapy. Even if you’re less sensitive to pain than most people, it’s like dying every time you use it. Why put yourself through that?”

“Because there are some things that only I can finish.”

“…If Lao-Qin were still alive, he wouldn’t be able to bear seeing you like this.”

“But I have no other choice.”

The director sighed deeply again. He didn’t know the full story between Qin Ciyan and Xie Qingcheng, but he wasn’t completely in the dark. In the past, he’d respected Xie Qingcheng’s opinions and kept secrets for him when he could. But seeing him now, walking closer and closer to death, he couldn’t help but sigh.

“If you want to increase the number of injections, you have to be prepared. If you get too many, your body’s response to the stress will be severe, and people could find out…”

“I know.”

“…Go on, then. To the injection room.”

Xie Qingcheng stood up. The old director, who seemed to have tired of talking to him, called out his name just as he was leaving.

“Xie Qingcheng.”

Xie Qingcheng’s fingers stopped against the door handle. He turned his head slightly.

“I understand your decision, but suffering like this without anyone supporting or knowing…I don’t think it’s kind to your friends and family. You should know that they don’t just want you to protect them, they also want you to allow them to take care of you. Otherwise, when they learn of the truth, they won’t be able to bear it.”

A pause. “Then they’ll never know.” He opened the door and disappeared into the end of the white corridor.

Meiyu Hospital had a special injection room reserved for Xie Qingcheng. There was nobody else there, and no medical staff to accompany him. Only the director knew what was happening, and everything was done in secret.

Xie Qingcheng verified his biometric information with a practiced hand, and the door opened.

This was the truth that Xie Qingcheng had been hiding from almost everyone close to him for the past few years. Inside was a three-person-tall chamber that contained a breathing mask, restraints, a needle tube, and a button that could be

used to call the director's office for help. Otherwise, the injection room contained only a cold metal bed, a medicine cabinet, and an operating table. Nothing else.

This was Xie Qingcheng's private treatment room.

Since he'd secretly started taking RN-13 again, he had to come to this room for treatment. At first, he only needed a dose two or three times a year, but as his health declined, it had reached the point where he had to come in every one or two months. When He Yu had been following him around, and realized he'd been disappearing more and more frequently… This was where he'd been. He had to repair his body, even if the process was far more painful than chemotherapy.

The injection room was quite impersonal-feeling, with no warmth to be found. The only thing that could comfort the person inside was a cloudlike jellyfish pattern carved on the glass cover of the incubator—that jellyfish was the only company Xie Qingcheng had as he endured the agony of the special treatment injection. He knew this room well; it was like he was coming home. He sterilized the area and injected the medicine into the chamber's infusion tube…

Once preparations were done, he took a deep breath and prepared himself to step into the incubator as usual. At that moment, his phone rang.

It was He Yu.

"Hello?"

"Hello, Xie-ge. I'm out of class now. Where are you?" The voice coming from the phone was clear, vigorous, and expectant. Xie Qingcheng could even hear the noise of his classmates in the background as he left the classroom. The young students were cheerfully discussing their evening plans.

"What should we eat tonight?"

"There's a new barbecue restaurant on East Street. I heard it's really good…"

"Xie-ge?" He Yu calling out his name brought him back to his senses.

Xie Qingcheng was alone in the cold, metallic treatment room, listening to noises coming from the other end of the line. For a moment, he felt like he was in hell, listening to the sounds of the living world. "I'm busy," he said after a moment. "I have a meeting off campus."

"Another meeting?"

"Yeah, it was last-minute."

"How long will it be?"

"What is it?"

"I want to eat dinner with you."

Xie Qingcheng didn't say anything.

"I'll wait for you to come back, okay?"

"No need," said Xie Qingcheng, snapping out of his stupor. "My meeting will be going pretty late, so you should eat first. If you really don't want to be alone, find someone to replace me."

"But nobody can replace you," He Yu insisted.

"…I really can't."

“Ah…you’re so busy. Fine, forget it this time.” He Yu must have thought he was in a rush. “Go to your meeting, then. I won’t bother you.”

After the call ended, Xie Qingcheng threw his phone onto the treatment bed. He saw his reflection in the metal plate, his features blurry, as if he had no expression.

…Yes. He shouldn’t have such stirrings.

Xie Qingcheng stood up and inserted a slender finger into the knot of his tie to loosen it. He stood in thought for a while, and then he turned off his phone, walked to the incubator, and pressed the start button, slowly closing his eyes. The breathing mask lowered and sealed over his mouth and nose, covering most of his face. The injection tube was inserted into the cinnabar mole on the back of his neck; at the same time, the mist of the evaporated drug rose up and slowly filled the entire incubator.

Hallucinogenic gas.

A slow, lengthy injection.

His body’s reaction was even more excruciating than cancer.

The director’s description was correct. Every time Xie Qingcheng lay in the incubator, it was like he was experiencing death. After he was injected with the drug, the air pressure in the chamber would increase quickly. His eardrums, sinuses, and heart were all placed under extreme pressure, and that was when the hallucinogenic effects of the drug would kick in. It made him feel like every bone was being pulled out of his body, before piercing back into his insides irregularly, growing disjointed thorns in his flesh. And then they were violently pulled out again, as if trying to drag out his soul.

The process took a long time, so the incubator was equipped with body restraints and handcuffs. Every time he struggled, they would tighten around him; in the end, his skin would be rubbed raw. It was like being trapped in a net, unable to move at all. Yet the real pain had just begun. When affected by the drugs, the person in the incubator would sink into increasingly realistic hallucinations. His amygdala would become erratic under the continuous, intense pressure, and Xie Qingcheng’s mind would keep replaying the most terrifying, painful events of his life.

His parents’ deaths.

His car accident.

Qin Ciyan’s death.

The time he left the hospital…

Terror continued to spread through his nervous system. He saw the rising water level in the studio and heard the faint sound of Jiang Lanpei singing. He saw Xie Xue collapsed in Chengkang Psychiatric Hospital. In that moment, he thought she was dead, her body cut to pieces.

Then, he seemed to be stuffed into an old teddy bear, dragging his tattered body back home only for a toddler Xie Xue to yell at him, “You’re not him! You’re not my gege!”

It was as if he had died not only in body, but also in soul.

Nobody knew how painful it was, and nobody knew the courage it took for him to survive. In the incubator, his pale face was hidden in the mist of the gas. His wrists were cuffed, his neck was wrapped in a collar, and his snow-white shirt was crisscrossed with black restraints. Even his cries of pain were smothered by the breathing mask covering his face.

It hurt so much. It was like his limbs and bones were being dissected, and his heart carved out.

After more than three hours, the treatment was over.

Xie Qingcheng slowly woke up from his pain-induced state of unconsciousness, gradually opening his eyes. His bangs were completely soaked with sweat. Just like the countless other times he'd endured the same injection, he was tortured to the point that he didn't even remember what day it was.

The automatic door to the incubator slowly opened. The remaining gas inside dissipated, and through it, Xie Qingcheng's visage posttreatment became visible. It held a fragility and exhaustion that few people had ever seen.

He was still bound in the chamber, stiff and cold. He had taken off his coat when he entered, so he was wearing only a plain white shirt and black slacks, which clung to his body, drenched in the mist and sweat. Under the wet shirt, his skin and musculature were faintly visible; his chest, upper arms, lower abdomen, and waist were all tightly bound by the restraints, as if he'd committed a crime instead of simply being ill. His face was bloodless, his gaze empty.

The treatment chamber slowly rose and fell. The automatic device could place the patient inside onto the metal treatment bed when the treatment concluded. Xie Qingcheng was still in a daze as he lay limply on the narrow surface. He looked as though he'd just been pulled out of the water, no strength left…alone and cold.

The sadness of his dreams still lingered on his face, his expression broken like shattered porcelain, as if his life had already come to an end. He was lying amid invisible ruins—or perhaps he was the ruins themselves. Only the faint rise and fall of his chest could prove he was still alive. There were still five to six years to go. This wretched life would be over then.

Xie Qingcheng lay on the bed for a long time before he regained control of his body enough to sit up. When he buttoned his coat, his fingers were trembling. He wiped away the reflexive tears at the corners of his eyes and slowly hid all traces of pain, especially the marks on his wrists. A consequence of the handcuffs digging into his skin… He took his leave through the door out to the hospital halls.

This was the secret he'd hidden—what Xie Qingcheng had said to He Yu in the flooded studio was not the complete truth. The hidden truth lay in the details of his current condition. It had once been deemed impossible for Xie Qingcheng to live past his forties, until a special extended release medication had been developed in the United States. He had chosen to give up his abilities and take the medicine, which gave him a body that was more like that of an ordinary person. All so he could lead an ordinary life.

But what he hadn't mentioned was that after Qin Ciyan died, and so much more had happened—Li Ruoqiu divorced him, Xie Xue got into her dream university, and Chen Man entered the police force—those around him had either returned to the dirt, left him for someone else, or become independent. He was like a tree whose leaves had fallen when autumn came and winter followed. He realized

that he was no longer indispensable.

Then came two unexpected incidents.

The first was when the research Qin Ciyan had left behind was destroyed. At the time, the handwritten files had been piled up across seven or eight boxes. Aside from the ones that Xie Qingcheng was actively sorting, most were left at his home. That voluminous research was like a treasure to Xie Qingcheng as he sorted through them for Lao-Qin. It was of little value to anyone else, so he didn't think it would be targeted. But when he returned home one day he found that there'd been a burglary, and Lao-Qin's notebook was ripped and strewn everywhere.

It was as if the burglar had been after some specific piece of information, but found nothing. In anger and frustration, they had viciously burned several notebooks of Qin Ciyan's medical notes with a lighter and thrown another twenty into the bathroom to drench them with the shower. When Xie Qingcheng found them, he could hardly read the words anymore.

At that moment, he felt like the sky had fallen. He reported the incident and tried to salvage the situation, but…nothing came of it. Criminal charges required criminal damages. Since nothing valuable was lost in the home, only some damaged medical notes that the police determined had no worth, nobody would seriously investigate it even if a case was filed. And even if the culprit was found, the twenty to thirty notebooks that held Qin Ciyan's life would never be recovered.

Xie Qingcheng couldn't remember how he managed to get through that period of time. He would dream of Qin Ciyan every night; the old man sat at his desk, writing. He dreamed of Mrs. Qin solemnly handing him the documents, escorting him out of the red brick building, and bowing slightly with tears in her eyes as she watched him leave. Every night, he woke up with a heart-wrenching sense of guilt, his hands shaking as he lit a cigarette. He didn't know how he could make up for the loss, or how to explain it to the elderly couple.

He could only guess what Qin Ciyan had written based on what he had access to in the remaining notebooks from the same time period. But experimental data, once lost, was gone forever. Who was the person who broke into the house? And what exactly had they wanted to find in Doctor Qin's notebooks? Xie Qingcheng, filled with pain, never received an answer.

Until the second incident happened.

Qin Ciyan's daughter, who married in the United States, was kidnapped by an unknown organization. When the police rescued her, Qin Rongbei had already been tortured to the point of a complete mental breakdown, and she was sent to a local psychiatric hospital for isolation and treatment. In her room, Qin Rongbei often repeated the same few words—

"Don't ask me. I don't know what the First Emperor is."

Chapter 157:
I Won't Touch It

AFTER HE VISITED Qin Rongbei in the United States, Xie Qingcheng realized that a criminal organization was looking for the First Emperor.

To protect him, Qin Ciyan had fabricated a lie about a computation system, saying that it had calculated all existing data files. He gave the nonexistent system a name—"The First Emperor Data." But some people truly believed that this system existed. First, they stole files from Xie Qingcheng's home, and after they found no information relating to the First Emperor there, they determined that Xie Qingcheng and Qin Ciyan's relationship was not close enough for them to share information with each other. Thus, they surmised that Qin Ciyan had given the First Emperor files to his daughter for safekeeping. Naturally, that didn't turn up anything either.

Qin Rongbei suffered terribly because of this. The organization used torture and drugs to interrogate her; doctors at the American psychiatric hospital believed that her nervous system had been irreversibly damaged, and she would spend the rest of her life in a confused daze. Her husband loved her very much, and took her home to take care of her. But he soon discovered that while she was in captivity, the criminals had injected various banned drugs into her body, causing immense damage to her bodily functions and organs. Her brain, in particular, began to slowly atrophy.

Thus began the countdown to the end of Qin Rongbei's life. And Lao-Qin's granddaughter, Qin Rongbei's daughter, was only eight or nine years old…

From these two incidents, Xie Qingcheng made a new decision. He tracked down Qin Ciyan's old friend, the director of Meiyu Private Hospital.

"I need a favor," he said.

"What is it?"

"I need to use RN-13 again."

Xie Qingcheng had lied to He Yu about the supernatural abilities of the First Emperor. Just as He Yu had his blood toxin, Xie Qingcheng, as the first case with the most complete psychological Ebola treatment, had his own special abilities. While RN-13 robbed him of a normal life, it also gave the First Emperor two priceless gifts:

Extraordinary adaptability.

And extremely high mental processing power.

This heightened versatility allowed Xie Qingcheng to conduct human experiments on himself, while the heightened mental processing power allowed him to deepen his understanding of several different fields at the same time. When Qin Ciyan was still alive, these abilities had let Xie Qingcheng conduct biochemical experiments while carrying out his medical studies at the same time. Later on, to become an ordinary person, he chose to give up his powerful mind and took treatment drugs to return to a peaceful life.

Now, to restore Qin Ciyan's experimental data as much as he could, fulfilling his promise to sort through it, as well as to develop a drug that could delay Qin Rongbei's organ failure, he'd decided to take RN-13 again. He needed the First Emperor's abilities. But because he had taken medicine to treat and completely suppress his psychological Ebola, the RN-13 had a much greater impact on his body. As his drug resistance increased, he had to take it more and more.

After each dose, there was a period of time during which he regained his unusually sharp mind and relatively healthy body. But very quickly, RN-13's side effects began to take a greater and greater toll on his body, and when he weakened again, the condition of his internal organs would be worse every time. His heart, liver, spleen, lungs…his eyesight and endurance, it would all decline quickly. He had to increase the dosage of the treatment medicine to try and balance the damage that RN-13 wreaked on his organs. His body was like a leaky medicine jar. He kept it intact with the necessary drugs, mending the gaps to make himself live longer.

Qin Rongbei's condition hadn't completely improved, and he hadn't finished sorting through Qin Ciyan's writings. He knew how important these were to Lao-Qin—they were practically his soul and life. And as for himself…

He had made his calculations.

He was a divorced man with no children and no plans to remarry. His sister had grown up and was very capable of taking care of herself and Auntie Li. He'd already given peace to Chen Lisheng, who'd sacrificed his life while investigating the death of his parents, by helping Chen Man gradually emerge from the trauma of his older brother's death.

He had already completed everything he needed to in life. Nobody needed him anymore. The rag doll that had pieced itself together and sewed itself up to return to the human world could finally leave in peace.

It was late when Xie Qingcheng returned to the staff dormitory, and he was surprised to find someone sitting in front of his room.

"…He Yu?"

He Yu had been dozing off at his door, already asleep, but when he heard his voice, he immediately woke up and got to his feet, saying, "Xie-ge."

"…Why are you here?" Xie Qingcheng was still weak and in pain and after his treatment; he had no energy to deal with the little devil in front of him. He instinctively pulled his sleeves down to cover his wrists. He didn't want He Yu to see the marks left by the handcuffs during his treatment, otherwise he'd have to deal with a round of questions.

The light was dim in the hallway, though, so He Yu didn't notice. He adjusted his shoulder bag and picked up the plastic bag on the ground next to him, smiling at Xie Qingcheng. "I passed by a Weixin milk tea shop earlier. It looked similar to the one we went to in Qingli County, and when I went in, I realized they really did sell boba for two yuan a cup. I brought some for you."

Xie Qingcheng was speechless.

"I still don't understand how you think this tastes good," He Yu complained good-humoredly.

He didn’t know if it was just because the treatment had left him so weak or what, but even his heart felt shaky, so much so that he felt an actual sense of danger as he faced He Yu. A moment of silence passed.

When he didn’t say anything, He Yu asked, “Are you done with your meeting?”

“What…? Oh.” Xie Qingcheng remembered the lie he had told in the treatment room.

He’d said he was going to a meeting, and He Yu really believed him, without a sliver of doubt. Xie Qingcheng was a truly upright man in his eyes. So he’d just waited for him silently.

The tearing feeling in Xie Qingcheng’s heart grew even stronger, and he felt like seeing He Yu standing there tonight was crushing his defenses. “Yes, it’s over,” he said.

He Yu smiled again. “Are you tired?” he asked, very gently. “It’s so late, you must be. Have you eaten?”

Noticing him shifting on his feet as he spoke, he realized that it was already June, when the bugs came out in full force. He Yu was only wearing student-style sweatpants, which left most of his calves exposed. Xie Qingcheng didn’t know how long he’d been sitting here for, feeding the mosquitoes. He Yu was slightly allergic to bug bites, he remembered, so he decided to stop talking to the boy at the door.

He knew that he should shoo him away; that was the right thing to do. But faced with those bright, expectant eyes, he couldn’t say it.

In the end, Xie Qingcheng opened the door and said, “Come in.”

He collapsed onto the sofa as soon as he entered. He was tired, and his reaction to the treatment worsened every time. He Yu wasn’t an outsider, so he couldn’t be bothered to play host. He even loosened his tie and ordered his guest to boil some water.

Hardworking Young Master He boiled the water, handing it to him along with the milk tea. He stood by the sofa, looking like a large dog waiting for his command. Xie Qingcheng felt uncomfortable. “Go do what you need to do,” he said, drinking a sip of water. “I want to lie down for a while.”

“What kind of meeting did you have? It looks like you ran a marathon,” He Yu sighed. He walked over and took off Xie Qingcheng’s slippers, then sat down by the sofa.

Xie Qingcheng opened his eyes slightly. He wanted to retract his feet, but He Yu had already taken them into his hands. He Yu lowered his head, put Xie Qingcheng’s feet onto his thighs, and slowly began to massage them.

Xie Qingcheng never liked it when girls crouched onto the ground to take care of tired guests—it always made him feel awkward. But He Yu was different. The two of them were closer than they ought to be, so when he did it, Xie Qingcheng didn’t find it off-putting. What’s more, he had somewhere learned how to accurately press on the proper acupoints. When these points on Xie Qingcheng’s soles were pressed, it made him feel sore and swollen, but he had no energy to struggle. The various defenses of Xie Qingcheng’s body had been weakened by his treatment. The massage felt so good that he couldn’t help but press a hand to his forehead, his throat bobbing, and let out a soft moan.

The last time He Yu had given Xie Qingcheng a massage, he could tell that he liked it a lot. Surprisingly, he was a lot more open with his enjoyment and vulnerability when he was tired; that low, hoarse voice laced with pain and pleasure felt like it was scratching at He Yu's heart. This was worth spending hours waiting outside the door, feeding the mosquitoes.

His gaze darkened as he rubbed Xie Qingcheng's feet. "I'll help you take off your socks?" he whispered.

Coming back to his senses, Xie Qingcheng shook his head, and tried to withdraw his feet. But He Yu held him down and peeled off his mid-calf socks.

Xie Qingcheng was a very modest person. He often wore dress pants with mid-calf socks so that he wouldn't show inappropriate flashes of his legs while he was moving around. This manner of dress, complying with social etiquette, was quite enticing to He Yu.

He Yu slowly removed the black socks, exposing his pale and slightly cold feet beneath, and Xie Qingcheng opened his eyes, beginning to wake up.

"Don't you find it dirty?"

"No, I think your feet are beautiful."

They really were. His feet were well shaped, with clear ankle bones and light blue veins. He was hygienic as well, and his transparent nails were like ice, capping the pale pink toes underneath.

After he took off the socks, the force of He Yu's fingers was deeper and more accurate. Xie Qingcheng was like a cheetah having its chin scratched; normally very powerful, but unable to resist the comforting sensation. He stopped struggling and let He Yu massage him.

"Mm…"

In contrast to when they were having sex, Xie Qingcheng didn't care if he made noises during a massage. When He Yu made him feel good, he would respond to the technique with a low, hoarse sound. He didn't think anything of his own voice, but He Yu enjoyed it very much.

"Does it feel good?" he asked as he massaged.

And, "Is this hard enough?"

Or, "Should I press harder?"

"…Lighter…" As Xie Qingcheng's sore, swollen Yongquan acupoint was pressed, he couldn't help but frown and gasp to make him stop. "It hurts…"

"It'll feel better when you get used to it."

"Ah…" His swordlike eyebrows were slightly knit—it was quite painful having the acupoint constantly stimulated, but it was addictive too.

As He Yu pushed down, his eyes darkened. He suddenly coughed and changed his seating.

"Are you tired?" asked Xie Qingcheng, weary but comfortable.

"No," He Yu replied, his voice hoarse. "How could I be tired while I'm making you feel good?"

As he spoke, he continued to massage Xie Qingcheng's soles, the dorsal surface of his foot…the ankles, then the Zusanli acupoint below the knee… When he reached the back of the foot, Xie Qingcheng slowly relaxed, but He Yu couldn't stand it anymore. He was playing with fire, and now he'd gotten burned. As he massaged and listened to Xie Qingcheng's unguarded sounds, he found it harder and harder to hold himself back, until finally, he cupped Xie Qingcheng's toes and lowered his head to kiss them gently. This was too much of a surprise; Xie Qingcheng wasn't prepared to receive this kind of stimulation while he was relaxed, and he came back to his senses with a shudder.

"He Yu, you—"

It was nothing to He Yu. This was the man he loved. He loved every part of his body. Even his flaws were precious, so how could he mind this? But that wasn't what Xie Qingcheng thought. When his eyes met He Yu's infatuated ones, his heart trembled, and he felt truly astounded.

They stared at each other for a long time. He Yu was enthralled by love and desire; he held Xie Qingcheng's feet like he was holding a flake of snow or a piece of jade, gazing down at the icy white instep, eyelashes trembling slightly…

Xie Qingcheng stared in silence as He Yu kissed it again.

The air became warmer, the romantic atmosphere almost energizing into a heavy plasma lingering around them. He Yu gazed at Xie Qingcheng with an increasingly enamored expression, his eyes showing his undisguised adoration for the man.

"Ge…"

His lips lightly touched Xie Qingcheng's skin, like a dragonfly skimming across water. The red dragonfly brushed across the back of his foot, sending ripples through his heart, and slowly flew upward…

He took Xie Qingcheng's hand in his own, nuzzled it with the tip of his nose, kissed his fingers one by one, and placed his warm lips on the back, reverently and softly.

"Ge…I want to be with you…

"I want your body…and your heart…

"Xie-ge…say yes. Date me. Put a label on us, please?"

Xie Qingcheng jolted awake, as if stabbed by an invisible sword. The tired, hazy mist in his eyes dissipated. He thought of the report he'd received today, of the fact that they were both men, of everything… He only had five to six years left… He woke up, as if from a dream, and wanted to push He Yu away.

But He Yu hadn't come back to his senses yet.

His heart was full of desire; how could he wake up so easily? He hadn't noticed Xie Qingcheng's odd reaction yet, still immersed in the rare, lovely atmosphere between them earlier. He rose and propped himself up over Xie Qingcheng's body, caging him against the sofa. He stared at him, obsessively and madly, gently and deliriously.

"Xie Qingcheng…" He lowered his head and kissed him.

Xie Qingcheng turned his face away suddenly, and the kiss landed on his carotid artery. The moment those lips touched his skin, something in Xie

Qingcheng's chest seemed to splinter apart, his heartstrings pulsating with his arteries. With a violent shudder, he began to push He Yu away fiercely.

"Don't…don't, I'm not in the mood today. He Yu…He Yu, stop!"

He was afraid.

He didn't know what he was afraid of. Was he afraid that He Yu would find the marks the handcuffs had left on him during treatment? Or was he afraid that he would see the cinnabar mole on the back of his neck—the site of his injection—that hadn't yet healed? Or…or was he afraid that he would fall with He Yu again… afraid that the poison he had planted deep in his heart would stir?

What was he afraid of?

He Yu was addicted to Xie Qingcheng. It felt like there was an invisible, magnetic pole on the man, drawing him closer and closer. For a moment, Xie Qingcheng caused him to lose his senses. Eyes blurred, He Yu continued to kiss him passionately, deaf to his protests. He thought he was beautiful, like a rose that belonged to him alone. This gorgeous rose might be dangerous, covered in thorns, but he couldn't help but pluck it.

The greater the mayhem in your heart, the more obsessed you became. The evil dragon kissed the flower, reaching out his hand to caress those trembling petals.

"He Yu, that's…enough… Let go, let go…"

"Xie-ge…"

He didn't hear him, too absorbed in his own actions. Every glint in his eyes could explain what it meant to be in love, and when that love was this deep, it was naturally tinged with desire. He instinctively reached out to unbutton Xie Qingcheng's shirt, but, finally pushed to the limit, Xie Qingcheng broke free of his grip. He slapped He Yu hard in the face.

"…!"

The slap was such a shock that He Yu came to his senses, finally looking down at the person who'd hit him. Xie Qingcheng tightly gripped his sleeves and buttons, trying his best to hide the traces of his treatment. His peach-blossom eyes were distressed and tumultuous.

"…Don't touch me."

When their eyes met, He Yu's expression darkened, growing complicated for just a moment. He instinctively revealed a trace of his madness, causing Xie Qingcheng to shudder with fright. But that madness was quickly suppressed.

"What's wrong?" He Yu asked. He tried to hold his hand, but Xie Qingcheng pulled away.

"Don't touch me," he repeated.

He Yu fell silent.

They looked at each other for a long time, before He Yu slowly got up to go sit on the sofa. His bangs fell over his brow as he hung his head in silence. If the person who slapped him earlier had been anyone but Xie Qingcheng, he would have killed them. But because it was him, he couldn't do a thing. He even felt guilty—because he saw fear so clearly in Xie Qingcheng's eyes. He was such a strong, courageous man, but every time he showed any fear, it was because of him.

He Yu turned his face slightly to look at Xie Qingcheng on the sofa—the man's hair was messy, and his fingers, like white jade, tightened on the collar of his clothes. There were still marks of the kiss from earlier on his throat, but between his proud eyebrows was his inviolable dignity, and…suppressed panic.

He Yu suddenly felt very uncomfortable seeing him like this.

"Ge…" he asked hoarsely. "Was I pushing you too hard? Did I remind you of the time when I…did that to you? I know…I know you have nightmares at night sometimes. You even start trembling…"

Xie Qingcheng didn't say anything.

"…Ge, I'm sorry." When Xie Qingcheng stayed quiet, He Yu paused for a moment, but went on, "I don't have to do this with you. If you're tired or not in the mood, tell me, okay? I won't force you anymore. Don't look at me like that, okay?" He stood up. "I-I'll go to your study to do my homework… I'll lock the door so you can have a good rest… I won't force you. I just want to stay with you… Don't…" He Yu's voice began to quiver. He was dejected, heartsick, and confused—the emotion in his voice made Xie Qingcheng's heart tremble again.

"…Xie Qingcheng," he said in a voice choked with sobs, "don't be afraid of me."

Chapter 158:
The Words That You Couldn't Say

XIE QINGCHENG didn't know how he ended up falling asleep.

With such a befuddled heart, amid such a chaotic turn of events, his past self would have never been able to fall asleep. But his health was worsening, and he had just undergone RN-13 treatment, a thousand times more painful than chemotherapy. He was weak, and after he calmed down on the sofa, he really did feel tired.

He didn't want to sleep. He needed to calm down, he thought, and think about the increasingly obvious trembling he felt in his heart when he faced He Yu. Why was it happening? He looked at the closed door of the study. The door separated them, him outside, He Yu inside, and it didn't open again… The more Xie Qingcheng thought about it, the more confused he became. Recalling what had happened, especially He Yu's choked sob, made him feel more and more uneasy. Cursing to himself and dejectedly falling back onto the sofa, he cast his eyes toward the blank ceiling and zoned out.

Tired and in pain, Xie Qingcheng finally fell asleep.

He dreamed that he was trapped inside a tattered teddy bear costume, standing in front of the Ferris wheel of an amusement park, waiting for someone. He didn't know who he was waiting for. He stood there, clumsy and shabby, holding a handful of balloons in his hand. The Ferris wheel turned slowly, its neon lights flickering, and the tourists who came off the ride were talking and laughing as they left. Nobody noticed him standing in the corner.

The tourists came and went in groups, all smiling happily, content. The shabby bear and his balloons were inconsequential to them, so they didn't see him. After a while, Xie Qingcheng realized that he was waiting for someone who needed him, someone who wanted to take a balloon from his hand. But he seemed to be under some kind of spell that didn't let him speak or meet others with his real face. He could only stand there, waiting…and waiting…

Amid the dreamlike music of the amusement park, a couple exited the ride, and Xie Qingcheng realized with a start that it was his parents. He wanted to move his body and walk over, but his father waved over a white horse carriage from the park, with Zhou Muying following him. Their figures were gradually carried away by the white horse.

Xie Qingcheng came to a stop, dazed. He knew they were gone already, never to come back.

The second person to come down from the Ferris wheel was Qin Ciyan. Lao-Qin was by himself, wearing the white coat he'd worn all his life and looking around with a smile. Xie Qingcheng wanted him to stop, but a child about six or seven years old ran over, holding an ice cream cone. He looked up and shouted something at Lao-Qin—Xie Qingcheng couldn't hear it.

But he already knew who it was.

Lao-Qin reached out his hand and held the little boy's in his own. The man and the boy gradually disappeared into the colorful lights of the park, looking very

happy. It was a happiness he'd never experienced in his life. Only Xie Qingcheng stayed in the same place. The sky began to darken.

The third person exited. It was Xie Xue, jumping and skipping, and as she ran closer, she turned from a five- to six-year-old girl to the grown woman she was now. When she passed by, she paused, staring at the shabby doll as if he looked familiar. A few seconds later, she walked in front of him and smiled, about to say something—but someone called her name in the distance. Xie Qingcheng couldn't see who it was, but he knew it was a man, the one Xie Xue would spend the rest of her life with.

Xie Xue heard the voice, turned her head, and gave the man in the distance a considering look—after all, she wasn't a child anymore, and dolls and colorful balloons were no longer a part of her world. She smiled at him one last time, waved to her favorite childhood teddy bear, and, her white high heels clicking as she walked, strode off toward her bright future.

The sky was completely dark.

People got off the Ferris wheel, one after another. Chen Man, Auntie Li, Li Ruoqiu… But they all had their own destinations. Nobody…nobody needed a hug from the tattered teddy bear. Nobody needed the colorful balloons that it held tightly in its paws. The amusement park was about to close, people leaving one after another. He stood alone listlessly, blinking slowly inside the bear. He was about to close his eyes and loosen his grip, allowing those balloons that could no longer bring cheer to anyone to float into the sky.

But then—

"Doctor Xie."

"Doctor Xie."

He heard someone calling for him. He opened his bleary eyes, but there was no one in sight.

"Look at me. I'm here."

He looked down and saw a neatly dressed, pretty child, about seven or eight years old, looking up at him. He Yu, just as he had been the first time they met.

"Doctor Xie, why aren't you going home?"

He couldn't reply. He was still under the spell, trapped in this doll. Even if he could answer, what would he say? He had no home anymore.

"Oh, Doctor Xie…" Little He Yu reached out his hand, holding up a small, dragon-shaped dough figurine. "I made this at the amusement park today… I'll give it to you…"

He tucked the dragon figurine into Xie Qingcheng's pocket.

The child smiled. "Can you praise me? Can you hold me?"

"…"

Can you hold me… He'd heard He Yu say it countless times. Sadly, impulsively, cutely, earnestly, pleadingly, desperately—He Yu's voice, asking him again and again. This lonely child, stubbornly begging for any answer. *Can you hold me? Xie Qingcheng? Just like how I hold you.* This child had always been waiting, waiting…

But Xie Qingcheng couldn't move. Inside the teddy bear, he couldn't speak, couldn't even bend his waist to give any kind of response. He Yu's expression slowly changed from expectation to hesitation, from hesitation to confusion, from confusion to disappointment… He just gazed at Xie Qingcheng, silent and dejected. And then—his body began to fade, too. He was going to disappear too.

He was going to disappear too…

Xie Qingcheng felt suddenly distressed. In the dream, he tried to break free of the spell; he wanted to give him the colorful balloons in his hand. He wanted to ask, *Can you see me? Do you know I'm inside?* He wanted to reach out to him—

His surroundings turned white in an instant. The colorful lights, the Ferris wheel, the brick streets with the parades—all of it faded, like a scene in a colored pencil drawing. Xie Qingcheng's eyes flew open. Someone was hugging him from behind. He didn't turn back, but his heart went from calm to racing as it caught up to his body. His chest was heaving, and he could feel the familiar warmth and scent… The child He Yu disappeared from his sight, while the grown-up He Yu hugged him from behind.

Xie Qingcheng could feel He Yu's hot tears flowing and falling onto his shoulders… The worn-out stuffed bear was tightly hugged by the tall, handsome young man.

"I know you're in there," He Yu whispered, crying. "Don't leave.

"I still need a bear doll.

"I still want the colored balloons in your hand…

"Xie Qingcheng, give me all your balloons and doll, okay?

"T-turn around and give me a hug, okay?"

And at that moment…

At that moment, Xie Qingcheng's heart received the heaviest, most powerful blow, one that broke the spell, broke his body's restraints. The ratty bear doll turned clumsily around, its eyes, like chocolate chips, staring at He Yu silently. It reached out its worn-out arms that no one needed to rely on anymore, and slowly…slowly raised them…hugging the young man who stood in front of him wiping away his own tears.

"Don't cry."

His hoarse voice had finally been released, and it flowed with difficulty from a throat that hadn't been able to speak in a long time.

"Don't cry, He Yu… Don't cry…"

His chapped lips murmured, his eyelids moved—Xie Qingcheng woke up from his dream. His eyes were still unfocused as the dream lingered. He raised his hand, trembling, and gently touched his eyelids. What…did he just dream of?

The earthquake in his heart continued, spreading to his limbs, his fingertips unable to stay calm. He wiped his eyes in disbelief and felt they were warm and moist. His tears really had fallen.

"…"

Xie Qingcheng lay woodenly on the sofa, chest heaving more rapidly than usual. The neon lights still flashed before his eyes, and the dreamlike song of the amusement park echoed in his ears. He didn't want to believe the dream. He didn't want to believe the answer he had given, the fragility he had found in himself there. Most of all, he didn't want to believe in those feelings that had flowed…

He had an answer for He Yu now.

He collapsed against the couch, dazed, his entire body weak. Swallowing hard, his throat bobbing and his eyes wide, he thought about this new revelation. His heart couldn't stop shivering as he remembered that final hug.

It took him a long time to stabilize his emotions. He wiped away the dampness at the corners of his eyes and looked at his wristwatch—it was two in the

morning. Had He Yu left already?

He turned to look at the door of the study; it was still closed.

Steadying his emotions once more, he rose to his feet. Right as he was about to knock on the door of the study, though, he heard the kitchen door open: He Yu was in the kitchen.

"You're awake?" He Yu clearly still felt awkward about what had happened before Xie Qingcheng fell asleep. He wouldn't look at him directly, but he lifted his hand to cover his mouth and coughed before saying quietly, "Um, I made a midnight snack. You didn't eat dinner, right? I was going to wake you up later. It'll be ready soon… Give me another five minutes."

He Yu wanted to bring the food out himself so that Xie Qingcheng didn't have to go into the kitchen, but Xie Qingcheng came anyway.

A clay pot was simmering on a low fire on the stove, bubbling with steam, a scent wafting out that was familiar to Huzhou natives. Xie Qingcheng walked over and saw He Yu's phone sitting in front of the stove. The young master wasn't great at cooking, so he followed a recipe he found online. The recipe title was displayed on the screen, cliché and straightforward.

Make a pot of soup for your darling.

Xie Qingcheng looked away, as if avoiding something. He took a damp towel to fend off the heat and lifted the lid of the pot. The steam billowed out, blurring his distinctly masculine features. As he'd expected, it was a pot of yanduxian. He loved this dish. Auntie Li made it sometimes, and he could as well, but it was never as good as his mother's. A typical southern dish requiring ingredients like tender bamboo shoots, ham, pork ribs, and tofu knots, it also required another, invisible ingredient: patience.

The "du" in yanduxian referred to the gurgling noise of the soup as it was simmered over low heat. During the long, slow process, the freshness of the bamboo shoots, the saltiness of the ham, and the umami of the pork ribs all blended into the essence of the soup, cooking into the tofu knots.

Despite how thick-skinned He Yu usually was, he lost his cool. He tried to shoo Xie Qingcheng out again, saying, "Don't stand there—it's hard for me to perform when you're here. G-get out first."

Xie Qingcheng stared at him silently.

"Don't stand in the kitchen. You're distracting me. Get out." Zhou Muying had said the same thing to him in the past. He Yu was just like her in this respect.

Xie Qingcheng wanted to say something, but in the end he left in silence. While he sat in the living room waiting, he remembered his dream, alongside everything that happened before. He knew He Yu had carved out his heart to give to him. He'd never seen such passionate love before, so at first, he only thought it a young man's momentary obsession. Something not real.

He was like a foolish king who dismissed priceless jade as an uncut stone, and He Yu was the man he'd wronged. He had proven that his feelings were real time and time again; he had told Xie Qingcheng, *You are irreplaceable. If you think it's wrong for me to love you, I'll be wrong for the rest of my life, and the day I die, I will have proven that I'm right.* He said, *I will be with you every day, every hour, every minute, every second of my existence. I will love you, protect you, and stay*

with you. Xie Qingcheng didn't have a heart of stone—it would be a lie to say he wasn't moved.

But the thing he really couldn't shake off was He Yu's need for him. Xie Qingcheng was a chauvinist, through and through. The thing he did most often, the thing he was used to doing was taking care of others; it was almost the meaning of his existence. He mulled this over. If he was gone one day, how would everyone around him survive? He knew that Auntie Li, Chen Man, and Xie Xue would be devastated, but he believed that they could support each other and slowly emerge from that sadness. They had many bridges to society; though it would be painful to lose him, they could still recover.

Then, he thought of He Yu.

If he wasn't here anymore, would He Yu still obediently make soup in the kitchen? Would he still painstakingly cook a meal from an online recipe on the stove? If he was gone, would He Yu still talk to other people, try to see a doctor, and try to restrain himself so as not to be devoured by his inner demons? Would he follow someone else, talking to them about everything that happened that day, and ask to be held?

It was very unlikely. He Yu was too stubborn. He could beat himself bloody, perish with his enemies, fall into depravity—but he didn't know how to turn back. Even if he knew he was at a dead end, completely in the dark…as long as he set out on a path, he would keep walking till he reached the end.

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes. He never would have expected that in the end, the person whose future he was most uncertain about, the person he was most worried about, would be He Yu.

"It's done! Try it!" He Yu came out of the kitchen and placed a steaming bowl in front of him. "I'm quite smart, so it should taste pretty good."

Xie Qingcheng looked down and found that it wasn't yanduxian.

It was a bowl of noodles. The soup was milk-white and rich, the noodles smooth and delicate, topped with blanched, tender green bok choy, a golden soft-boiled egg, and a dash of fragrant minced meat and shiitake mushrooms. There were a few tofu knots and a sprinkled handful of white sesame seeds. But the essence of yanduxian lay in the broth and the tofu knots, slowly suffused with the freshness of bamboo shoots and the savory taste of ham.

He looked at the bowl of yanduxian soup noodles. He Yu had exhausted all his passion, love, and kindness to eagerly present them before him.

Something in his heart collapsed.

"He Yu."

The boy lifted his almond-shaped eyes. "Hmm?"

His silence hung in the air.

Xie Qingcheng found himself wanting to apologize for how cruel he'd been before. He had gotten furious at him for no reason, but just a few hours later, He Yu had made him a pot of warm soup… He felt troubled; he really did want to reach out and give the lonely dragon a hug. Just like the way He Yu had hugged him, trapped in the tattered old bear, in his dream.

But in the end, he resisted the slight shivering of his fingertips, failing to follow through. If a bridge was going to be demolished, it shouldn't become a

familiar path to the young man. Rationality won in the end, and Xie Qingcheng looked away.

"You should have some, too."

"I'll just eat the meat. I like eating meat."

Xie Qingcheng's words still stuck in his throat.

Everyone knew that the flavor of the meat in yanduxian all stewed into the soup, leaving it with no taste at all. But He Yu, despite being a notoriously picky eater, scooped some pork ribs into his bowl and started gnawing at them in front of him, like a dog.

After a long moment of thought, Xie Qingcheng finally made up his mind. "…He Yu. Come over this weekend, and I'll make you whatever you want to eat. Then…"

Before he could finish, He Yu's elation and dismay overflowed in equal measure. "Weekend? I…have a sports festival this weekend; the school signed me up."

Xie Qingcheng paused for a moment. "Then focus on your event. We can try again another time."

"Then will you come watch me compete?"

He didn't answer.

"Will you?"

"I have class in the morning on the weekend. I'll try to make it."

Xie Qingcheng felt the boy's gaze was too hot, so he lowered his eyes and started to eat his noodles. He Yu was happy again. And Xie Qingcheng's heart began to ache… He finally realized that he cared about He Yu in the same way He Yu cared for him. But what could he do? His life was short. If he couldn't let go of the warmth He Yu gave him, if they continued like this, then when he left this world, he would have enjoyed the boy's love, but left him with eternal sadness. It was too selfish and irresponsible.

Short pain was preferable to drawn-out pain. He'd delayed it for so long, and it turned out that was because He Yu had always been in his heart, so deep that it was hard to remove… But now, it was time to break it off.

It was time for him to let go of the child who wanted to hug the teddy bear.

Chapter 159:
You Finally Hardened Your Heart

THE WEEKEND came in no time.

The sports festival took place at the Huzhou University track field. He Yu was registered for the men's 1,500-meter run, 200-meter sprint, and 3,000-meter run. Their class's physical education committee member was to blame for this. The men's 1,500-meter and 3,000-meter races were like hot potatoes; no one wanted to participate. So the committee member had sneakily signed He Yu up while he was picking up girls at Huzhou Medical School next door.

The 1,500-meter run was the last race, taking place at noon. He Yu, wearing a white sports shirt and shorts, stood on the field. He was truly handsome, and had an extraordinary aura about him. He glanced at the audience, scanning over the excited seniors, but he didn't spot Xie Qingcheng.

At that moment, the whistle sounded.

"On your marks! Get set! Go!"

The gun went off, and the race started.

By the time Xie Qingcheng arrived, the race was already over. He Yu had come in second place, and he was still panting as he sat next to the track, his hands propping him up from behind. His classmates were lying around him, sweating profusely, and their youthful visages made Xie Qingcheng stop in his tracks. He thought the scene a beautiful painting. But if he walked into it as his sickly self, the beauty of the image would disappear.

Someone handed He Yu a bottle of water, and he gulped it down. He took a breath, his damp bangs hanging into his eyes. As he fell backward again, he said something to his classmates with a smile. At that moment, he caught a glimpse of Xie Qingcheng next to the stands. There was no strength left in him at first—what normal college student would have any energy in him after a 1,500-meter race? This wasn't a sports, military, or police academy. But when he saw Xie Qingcheng, his energy returned. Under the sunshine, he smiled, sat up, and pushed himself to his feet, climbing over the railing and running toward him.

"You're here."

"…Mm."

"Did you just get here?"

Xie Qingcheng hummed again in affirmation. "Are you done already?" he asked.

He Yu put his hand to his forehead with a smile. "No, I still have the 3,000-meter race in the afternoon. Since you're here, I'm sure I'll get first place."

"…It's enough to do your best. You don't have to work so hard for just a sports festival. Sit down and take a break."

He Yu very obediently sat down next to him.

Huzhou University's track field was built according to the proper regulations of a standard track-and-field stadium. It was large, and there weren't many people near where they were sitting. As they sat there, the atmosphere turned into something like that of a high school date. In the distance, students in groups of twos and threes were cleaning the track in preparation for the afternoon events.

He Yu stretched out his long legs. "Xie Qingcheng," he asked, "did you participate in the sports festival when you were in school?"

"That was a long time ago."

"Did you?"

"…I did."

"Which event?"

"Long-distance running, like you."

"Then you must have been the fastest."

Indeed, Xie Qingcheng had been first place every time.

Seeing his tacit admission, He Yu refused to fall behind in the afternoon event. "Don't worry," he told him. "I won't embarrass you."

It was lunchtime, and Xie Qingcheng had brought a lunch box for He Yu to repay the favor from the other night. It was Yangzhou fried rice. The golden, soft fried rice was fragrant, and the hand-peeled river shrimp gleamed. He handed it to He Yu, who was stunned motionless, and opened a bottle of yogurt soda for him.

"…What are you looking at me for? Eat."

He Yu's heart suddenly felt incredibly warm. He couldn't believe that Xie Qingcheng would actually make a bowl of Yangzhou fried rice just for him. He wanted nothing more than to hold him in his arms and kiss him, but out here on the track field, he couldn't do anything. Suppressing his joy, he took the chopsticks.

"You really made food for me?"

"…I told you I would. I wanted to fulfill that promise."

He Yu smiled, failing to glean the hidden meaning of his words. Xie Qingcheng had come to watch him, even made fried rice for him. He would never lose, even if it meant death.

The third event in the afternoon was the men's 3,000-meter race.

Before He Yu left, he very seriously told Xie Qingcheng, "Wait for me. I'll get first place just for you."

"…It's fine. It's okay if you're a little slower. It's just a race."

The people competing with him were the guys who ran the 1,500-meter race in the morning. He Yu hadn't paid much attention to the others, but there was a senior exchange student, a young Black man, who seemed to have the physical advantage. He Yu had lost to him that morning.

The gun went off, and He Yu shot out like an arrow. From the start, he and the Black guy left the other students far behind, after which they entered the endurance period of the long-distance run. They were competing with each other, neither of them giving in, and they took turns leading like a tide, turning the men's 3,000-meter race into a 200-meter sprint.

One lap… Two laps…

The audience was shocked by this desperate racing.

"Wh-what's going on?" one student stammered. "Why are they running so hard? Do they get a ticket to the VIP box in the Olympics or something if they win?"

The Black student was also thinking the same thing. *What's wrong with this guy?* he wondered. *Why does he want first place so badly?*

As they raced neck and neck for the last two laps, they were nearly fully exhausted.

"Hey, what's up with you?" the exchange student panted, with a puzzled look on his face. "It'll be embarrassing if I don't get first place in this event!"

He Yu expressed that he understood, but he added, "Sorry, dude. My wife is watching in the stands, so I can't afford to lose."

"Aren't you a student?" his opponent asked. "How come you have a wife?"

He Yu gave him a mysterious look.

Realization dawned. "Could it be…you got a girl pregnant, so you had to get married early?"

"Bro, your Chinese is great. You don't need to win this long-distance race—you can try participating in a debate next time."

While the other student was still in shock, thinking, *The affairs at your school are so messy,* He Yu sped up and passed him.

How could he allow this? He came back to his senses. Though he sympathized with this young father, who was about to enter the grave of marriage in his early twenties, he couldn't throw this race. He sped up, catching up with him.

The last lap!

"Fuck, it's so close!"

"The men's 3,000-meter race is so exciting!"

"Hurry! Faster!"

The audience in the stands jumped to their feet, craning their necks to see the situation on the field more clearly. Xie Qingcheng didn't want to stand up at first, but everyone else did, so he couldn't see anything unless he stood up as well. He Yu fell behind at the last bend, the gap widening…

Most sighed, thinking it was a pity that this handsome student who had fought so hard for so long was still going to miss out on the trophy. But He Yu gritted his teeth and refused to admit defeat. When they came to the last 300 meters, he found a burst of strength from nowhere, chasing after the Black student in front of him!

Five meters, one meter… The gap kept shrinking, until finally—

Bang!

He hit the finish line. He Yu passed the other student at the last moment, triggering the fireworks set to go off at the end of the race. Confetti fell. There were a few seconds of silence from the stands…before they erupted with cheers!

"Wow!"

“That was so exciting!”

“Overtaken! Overtaken! He got first place!”

He Yu sat down on the field, and amid the rain of flowers and confetti flowing from the sky, he waved toward Xie Qingcheng in the audience. A sweaty, youthful smile plastered his face. In that moment, nobody could see that he was once a lonely patient covered in scars. A breeze blew across Xie Qingcheng’s face. Gazing at He Yu from afar, he squinted, as if the light hurt his eyes. His heart ached, and for a moment, he couldn’t see He Yu’s face clearly…

“Professor Xie, what’s wrong?”

The dizziness came suddenly.

When Xie Qingcheng came back to his senses, he found that he was still sitting in the stands. Two students beside him who had come to watch the day’s events noticed his strange behavior and asked after him, worried. “I’m fine,” he said, pressing a hand to his forehead.

He sat in the stands. It took a while for him to recover.

Sports festivals were where vitality flourished, especially college sports festivals—they represented youth, vigor, and hope. Those values surrounded him on all sides, but they seemed not to apply to him at all. He knew that even if he used RN-13 continuously, the deterioration of his organs would become more and more obvious. RN-13 had a great impact on the optic nerve, so his vision was affected most of all. But he needed his sight, whether for doing experiments or sorting out data. He closed his eyes. He knew that he didn’t have much time left…or, rather, he knew he had less time than he’d expected.

Xie Qingcheng rested a little while longer before finally standing up. When He Yu was called up to accept his award, he left the crowded venue and walked away. At first, he wanted to go back to his dormitory, but his body couldn’t bear it, so he walked to the indoor arena and sat back down. There was no one here, so he leaned against a bench next to the badminton court.

He was surprised when, after a short while, He Yu came looking for him.

“Xie Qingcheng, what are you doing here?”

The light in here was dim, and he didn’t notice Xie Qingcheng’s pale face. He assumed Xie Qingcheng must just have gone to sit inside because he couldn’t handle the strong afternoon sun. He Yu had no idea what he was going through, let alone thinking. But he was very happy, and his enthusiastic mood was contagious; even Xie Qingcheng’s heart, on the verge of freezing over, warmed a little. He looked up at him, and right as he was about to say something, He Yu dipped down and kissed him.

“…”

“Xie Qingcheng, did you see me win?”

“…”

“I didn’t embarrass myself because I thought of you.”

“…”

“Xie-ge.”

After running the 3,000-meter race, He Yu was drenched with sweat and had no right to have any energy left. But He Yu was like a warrior who had claimed victory in battle; his blood was boiling, unable to calm down. He nuzzled Xie Qingcheng with his nose again and again.

"Xie-ge, can I ask for a small reward this time?"

When Xie Qingcheng gazed at those joyful, pure eyes, he felt like his voice was stuck in his throat.

He Yu asked again, "Ge…can I?"

He was about to seal off his heart, so why was this ray of light shining through?

Xie Qingcheng felt a dull ache in his chest. His vision continued to blur. He couldn't see He Yu's face clearly. His dizziness came back. For a moment, he couldn't speak, and he felt barely any strength left in him. When his weakness abated and he came back to his senses, He Yu had already led him to the bathroom in the gym.

The bathrooms in the university gym were usually empty. He Yu pushed Xie Qingcheng into one of the cubicles and locked it behind him, kissing him between heavy breaths. He wanted to ask for his real "reward." His body was hot after the strenuous exercise, and he leaned toward Xie Qingcheng to unbutton his shirt.

"He Yu…"

There were still marks from his treatment on Xie Qingcheng's wrists, and he clutched his sleeves tightly, refusing to let go.

"Ge, can we do it today?"

"No, we can't…"

"Just once…" He Yu pleaded cutely. "It's suffocating. I can't hold back anymore…"

Xie Qingcheng didn't say anything.

"Can you hold me?"

He knew he shouldn't be like this with He Yu. They'd sunk deeper and deeper, until they gradually settled into how they were now. But he had no strength left. The sudden onset of his illness had made him weak, and even his vision blurred —seeing this brilliant sunset while he knew the dark ending beyond it made him break down all the more.

In the end, they did it in the bathroom, and it was intense. He Yu was covered in sweat, and he kept slamming into Xie Qingcheng as he held him, inexhaustible, as if the 3,000 meters he just ran had been run on a separate reservoir of energy. The cubicle door shook, and it only stopped for a while when another student entered the stall right next to them. But He Yu was in his last stretch and couldn't stop at all, so he simply pressed Xie Qingcheng against the wall. The noise they made was constant, and the student in the next cubicle could obviously hear it; he was shocked silent for a long moment. But he couldn't identify the pair of people who were crazy enough to have sex in a public bathroom.

He Yu covered Xie Qingcheng's mouth to keep him silent. He was on the verge of falling apart; he knew there was someone in the next cubicle and he wanted to stop, but He Yu refused. Instead, he pressed against him as if he wanted

people to hear their noises. Nobody had the courage to come in, anyway.

"Does it feel good? Hm? Does it?"

Xie Qingcheng couldn't make a sound, but He Yu didn't mind being heard. His voice was hoarse beyond recognition, so other than Xie Qingcheng, nobody else could tell it was him.

"Hold me tight, baby…"

He Yu was so deeply passionate, so ecstatic and lustful, that the bathroom divider felt like it was about to collapse from the shaking.

After he finished, he took a deep breath and kissed the trembling Xie Qingcheng. He lowered his voice and said to the person outside, "Have you heard enough? If you have, get the hell out! If I see you when I come out, we'll just have to find out whether or not you can bear the consequences."

The eavesdropper hurried away, not daring to stay any longer.

He Yu slowly pulled out of Xie Qingcheng's warmth. With darkened eyes, he tore off some paper and slowly wiped himself clean.

"Ge…let's go to my apartment, okay?"

Xie Qingcheng was utterly exhausted. Tormented in such a way while already in pain from the flare-up of his illness, he'd nearly fainted several times in the process—but he forced himself to stay awake so that He Yu wouldn't realize something was wrong with his body. He Yu thought he just wasn't resisting, and it even made him blush a little. He kissed him again, carefully and appreciatively helping him up. He gingerly tidied Xie Qingcheng's messy clothes and helped him out of the bathroom. He'd parked his car nearby; after they got in, he couldn't help but do it again in the car before they set off.

Men always lied. Promises like "I'll just do it once" were just empty words. He Yu did it six times that day, until it was late at night, the sky dark. In the end, he fell asleep contentedly, hugging Xie Qingcheng on the large bed in the bedroom of his apartment. He never noticed anything abnormal about him.

Xie Qingcheng was so ill that he could barely curse at him, but He Yu thought he just didn't want to resist. He never took off his shirt, as if he was hiding something—He Yu found this a bit strange, but didn't think about it too much. Xie Qingcheng's fragility filled his heart, and there was no room for anything else.

The next morning, He Yu woke up to find Xie Qingcheng still asleep. He gently kissed his eyelashes, and was about to say something when he realized that the man in his arms was very warm. He Yu was shocked. Did he have a fever? He immediately grabbed a thermometer and measured his temperature. 101 degrees Fahrenheit… Worried, he wanted to call Anthony, his personal doctor, but he thought it would be inappropriate.

He gently shook Xie Qingcheng. "Ge…"

No reaction.

He called his name three or four times before Xie Qingcheng stirred from his drowsiness, and stared at He Yu with vacant eyes. It was as if his soul had been stolen away. He Yu's heart softened immediately; he even regretted that he was unable to control himself yesterday.

“Ge,” he said quietly, hugging him, “you have a fever. I’ll take you to the hospital, but you have to get up first.”

But when Xie Qingcheng heard “take you to the hospital,” an avoidant instinct kicked in and he began to wake up. “No, I won’t go,” he insisted with that pale face of his.

“But you need to get an IV drip so—”

“I won’t go!” His reaction was nearly violent, and he started coughing fiercely.

Startled, He Yu gathered himself. “All right, then we won’t go,” he agreed quickly. “I’ll go buy some medicine to bring your fever down, so lie down.”

The raging fever kept Xie Qingcheng unconscious for two days. On the morning of the third day, he finally felt a bit better. Leaning against the back of the bed, he watched He Yu’s bustling figure. He knew He Yu had skipped classes these past couple of days—he didn’t dare leave, so he’d stayed by Xie Qingcheng’s side the entire time. However long Xie Qingcheng slept for was how long He Yu would watch over him.

Tilting his pale face slightly, he thought thoroughly for a long, long time. Over the past two days, he had weighed the pros and cons of everything, forcibly peeling off the last bit of hesitance. Like cutting off his own flesh or digging out his own eyes.

He Yu brought him a bowl of congee.

The young master wasn’t very good at housework to begin with, but he had been making a lot of porridge of various kinds lately, as if wanting to persuade Xie Qingcheng to eat more of it. Xie Qingcheng held that bowl of food as if holding someone’s overly passionate heart—until he almost couldn’t bear it anymore. Finally, he put the spoon down, lifted his head, and looked at He Yu… The high fever made his eyesight even worse. At this distance, he could no longer see He Yu’s expression clearly without glasses.

It was better that he couldn’t see. This was for the best.

With that thought in mind, he said, “He Yu.”

He Yu turned around, his cheeks still smudged with soot from scrambling to make porridge. “What?”

“I’ve thought about it,” Xie Qingcheng said. “About our relationship.”

He Yu didn’t say anything.

“I admit that you’re right. I know you truly like me.”

His eyes widened, holding onto hope.

But Xie Qingcheng couldn’t see it. Everything was blurry. Finally, he spoke softly, haltingly, the words that he’d suppressed for a long time—the words that would not allow him to turn back. “I’ve tried to accept it, but I can’t.”

“…”

“I’m sorry,” Xie Qingcheng said. “I’m not able to return your feelings. So this is our last time.

“It’s over.”

Chapter 160:
You Left Again

HE YU STOOD there blankly.

He thought perhaps he'd heard incorrectly. "What did you say?"

"…"

Before Xie Qingcheng could speak again, He Yu interrupted him as if to avoid it, stuttering, "N-n-no… W-wait… There's still snow pear with fritillary bulb on the stove… I'll get it for you…"

As if that pot of snow pear soup could change everything. He turned, wanting to run into the kitchen like it was his shell and nothing could harm him in there. But still, Xie Qingcheng's voice floated over, freezing him in his tracks.

"There's no need, He Yu."

He Yu's silence hung between them.

"I should go back."

They had slept together many times now, and many times, Xie Qingcheng had woken up afterward and refused to acknowledge anything. But this time, as he stabbed He Yu in the heart, he was stabbing himself as well. Every word that came out of his mouth was like a thorn drilling further into his own soul. Already very weak from illness, Xie Qingcheng was trembling slightly with the effort of holding it together.

But He Yu couldn't see that.

Those decisive words had reduced him to tears. His face was wet, and he didn't dare turn back. He felt like he was being bullied again. Every time Xie Qingcheng finished using him, he didn't want him anymore and would say all types of cruel things. He Yu didn't know what he'd done wrong. He'd sincerely been doing his best—just as he boiled the snow pears in the pot, he'd simmered his emotions until they were all soft and tender, making them as easy to swallow and digest as possible before presenting them nervously to the man he loved.

But Xie Qingcheng said it was over. He would never like him.

His back still to Xie Qingcheng, He Yu opened his mouth a couple of times. The first time, he couldn't make a sound, but the second time, he found his voice. It was incredibly hoarse.

"E-eat the pear first…and then we can talk about this, okay?"

"…"

He choked up. "Eat a little…just a little…okay? I spent a lot of time learning how to make it…"

I spent a lot of time learning how to make it. At first, I didn't know how to do housework, peel fruit, or stew snow pears with rock sugar and fritillary bulb. At first, I would never lower myself like this just to love someone. I would never take care of someone so wholeheartedly and sincerely. I know how to do it now. I spent a lot of time learning, Xie Qingcheng.

Just try it.

Just look at me, once.

He Yu's finger was wrapped in a band-aid; he'd cut it while peeling the pear, and it bled. At the time, he didn't care. He'd just waited for Xie Qingcheng to wake up so he could bring him a bowl of steaming snow pears with fritillary bulb. But when Xie Qingcheng woke, he said he didn't want him.

His tears kept falling. His crying was so heartbroken, but he suppressed his voice so Xie Qingcheng wouldn't hear him. He didn't want to turn around, so Xie Qingcheng couldn't see him. He walked into the kitchen, head lowered, and closed the door with a thump.

On the countertop was sugar, pear slices, and a fruit knife. He packed these things up little by little, weeping silently all the while. He'd never started the stove in this apartment after he got the key—he used to live alone and was too lazy to cook, always either going out to eat or asking the hotel chef to deliver him food. This was the first time he'd turned on the stove for someone else, turning the "apartment" into a "home."

He hadn't expected things to end like this.

He Yu stood in the kitchen for a long time, suppressing his tears and trying to calm himself down. He washed his face again so Xie Qingcheng wouldn't see that he'd cried. Eventually, the kitchen door opened.

Xie Qingcheng stood outside the door, already changed into new clothes. "He Yu."

"…"

"This isn't because there's something wrong with you."

"…"

"It's my own problem. I can't accept another man's love."

He Yu looked down, standing helplessly beside the sink. "Is gender…so important to you?"

He lifted his head. Xie Qingcheng could see immediately that this child…had cried. His eyes were damp and red as they stared at him.

"Xie Qingcheng, is that so important?"

"…"

"Is it more important than sincerity?"

Xie Qingcheng could make no response.

What could he say? He couldn't say, *I'm sorry, He Yu. I don't care that you're a man. It's because I don't have much time left, and I realize that I can't change your feelings toward me at all, so this is the only thing I can do. Please don't waste your youth on me.* He Yu stayed silent for a while, watching the small flames flicker beneath the pear soup on the stove. He'd been holding back all this time, but now something snapped in him.

He looked back at Xie Qingcheng, his voice trembling with sorrow. "Did you know, Xie Qingcheng, that you'll never find someone else in this world that will love you as much as I do?"

Xie Qingcheng gazed at him for a long time. In that moment, he wanted to reach out his arms to comfort this clumsy, distressed, pitiful, yet proud young dragon. His feelings toward He Yu had gone from shock at first, to doubt, to heart-wrenching pain. When Xie Qingcheng and Li Ruoqiu had divorced, he said he'd never seen, and wouldn't believe in, a love that was like a moth to an open flame. Risky, careless.

But He Yu had shown him.

The more clearly he saw this love, the more his heart ached. He Yu was like a puppy on the side of the road; he thought he was pitiful, so he threw him some food. He wanted to maintain that simple relationship, never thinking of adopting the dog or nurturing any unnecessary, closer relationship with it.

But the puppy didn't think the same way. The puppy waited for him obediently every day, happily bounding over to circle him and rub himself against his legs. He had unintentionally tamed him—but he knew that soon, he would never use this road again, and the animal would never see him again. What choice did he have, other than not feeding it any more food, pretending to not see it?

Of course, the puppy didn't know that. It chased after him, whimpering, unable to understand why it was suddenly being ignored. Was it too dirty? Too ugly? Or was it because it was a sick little thing? So he would feed it only a few mouthfuls of food. But he wouldn't hold it, and couldn't love it back. Xie Qingcheng didn't reach out to him. He wouldn't hug He Yu.

"I know," he said. "I know it's impossible to meet someone who loves me as much as you do."

He Yu's eyes slightly widened, flashing a sliver of hope.

Xie Qingcheng didn't deny his feelings. He knew that he shouldn't deny any of He Yu's sincerity, especially after he left him when he was fourteen. This was the last bit of respect and protection he could give him.

"He Yu, I'm already thirty-three years old. I've been married and divorced; I've been on many blind dates and met countless people." Xie Qingcheng leaned against the warm stove, weakly and quietly, almost gently, telling He Yu what he truly felt from the bottom of his heart. "To be honest, my circumstances aren't the best. I'm old, in poor health, unromantic, a workaholic, and I can't provide much in the way of material things. I'm well aware of my shortcomings."

He Yu's tears were about to start flowing again. He shook his head.

Xie Qingcheng was usually very confident and strong. He almost never disparaged himself. But right now, he practically sighed as he laid out his own ugliness one shameful aspect at a time. Seeing him admit his awful circumstances so calmly and with such clear-eyed sobriety was more painful to He Yu than being rejected.

He choked out, "That's not true…"

"It's the reality," Xie Qingcheng said calmly. Facing someone who treated him with sincerity, he could lay his own wretchedness bare. "Truthfully, I know the most suitable ending for someone like me is to die alone. I know I am somewhat good-looking, so some women will like me, but liking is different from love, and love is different from true feelings of the heart. After Li Ruoqiu and I divorced, I had given up; I believed I would never receive any true feelings again.

“But you gave this to me.

“He Yu, I’m very sorry. I didn’t believe that you truly loved me, at the beginning. Because you’re so young, and you’re a boy, I mistakenly believed that you had misunderstood your own feelings. I even wanted to lead you to admit it was a type of dependence.” Xie Qingcheng paused, coughed lightly, and continued. “I know I hurt you.”

“Xie-ge…”

“Let me finish.” Xie Qingcheng’s lips were pale to begin with, but now they were even more sickly white. “I know you’re the best—you treat me the best. You practically want to carve out your own heart for me to see, to make me understand your feelings. I’ve seen it all now, He Yu. I understand it all.”

This time, the little devil couldn’t hold back anymore. The tears in his eyes became heavier and heavier. He turned his head to the side, stopped for a bit, and lifted his hand to wipe them away.

He felt so hurt. The feeling of being constantly denied, suppressed, misunderstood, yet finally recognized one day—anyone who had gone through that would understand the bitterness and pain that surged into his heart.

“It’s my fault. I was too arrogant, thinking I knew more than you because I’m older. I didn’t respect your feelings.”

He Yu’s almond eyes were red. “Xie-ge,” he whispered.

“He Yu, I’ve never met anyone who’s loved me as much as you have. I know that I won’t meet anyone else like that in the future, either. You’ve given me so many irreplaceable memories and feelings.”

“…”

“I’m very thankful.”

“…”

“Truly.”

Xie Qingcheng gave a soft sigh. He closed his eyes, his throat bobbing as he swallowed. He’d finally given He Yu the apology and recognition he deserved. All that was left were the final cruel words he had to say. He’d already expressed all the warmth he had, and his chest was due to freeze over, locking down the ice city of his heart.

He slowly opened his eyes. “But I can’t accept you. I can’t do it.”

“Wh-why…”

“Because I feel guilty. I feel too guilty when we were together, and I feel that the things we did…everything we did last night…was too…immoral, too perverse. It shouldn’t have happened.” He forced the words out of his mouth. “Can you imagine what you were doing when I was twenty? When I was twenty, you were only seven. When I met you for the first time, you were so young, just a child. When I was in high school, you were just born… The further I think about it, the more ridiculous it seems. We’d become a laughingstock if we were together. Do you understand?”

He Yu stared at him with red eyes and shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“…”

“Why do you care about other people if we’re together? I don’t care about anything. I don’t care what others say about me.”

“He Yu…you shouldn’t be tormented like that. It’s painful to be talked about all the time. You can’t…”

“I’m not afraid,” He Yu said. “And you’ve been suffering from that this entire time. From the moment you left the hospital, you’ve been enduring it. So why can’t I?”

He had no way to answer.

“I know you’re afraid that I’ll be hurt the same way, that people will laugh at me for falling in love with a man who’s old enough to be my uncle…but I don’t care about them! I don’t care what anyone says about me, because I know who I am! I’m just in love with someone. I won’t change no matter how they criticize me.”

His expression was very stubborn, the look in his eyes determined.

“I don’t care about them. I don’t care about what they see and what they say, Xie Qingcheng. I don’t care about anyone in this world except you.”

Xie Qingcheng listened in silence.

He was doing his best to seal the door to his heart, but He Yu tried to break in over and over again, desperate to stop the gate to the ice city from closing with his own flesh and blood. Xie Qingcheng felt even worse. *If I went to hell, would you follow? Could you turn the sea of fire into a river of stars, a mountain of sharp swords into a forest of fragrant flowers?*

He closed his eyes and said, “But I care.”

“…”

“I can’t accept being with my sister’s student.”

He Yu wouldn’t give up. Like a madman, he insisted, “If you really care, then I’ll drop out.”

“It’s no use even if you do that. I can’t accept being together with a boy thirteen years my junior.”

“Then I can find a way to change my ID card.”

“I can’t accept being together with your father’s—He Jiwei’s son.”

He Yu became more and more anxious. “Th-then I…”

Xie Qingcheng lifted his hand and gently touched He Yu’s head, not letting him finish. He knew that though the things he said sounded crazy, He Yu meant every word. “I understand your sincerity. But…I’m sorry.”

“…”

“This is my final decision.”

He couldn’t continue to face He Yu. He took his hand back; he wanted to say something else, but didn’t. He turned around, about to leave… And at that moment, He Yu chased after him and hugged him from behind. The hot tears that the young man had been holding back fell onto Xie Qingcheng’s neck, lingering briefly over the cinnabar mole before sliding down.

“Xie-ge…”

"…"

"Doctor Xie…"

He couldn't reply.

"Xie Qingcheng…! Are you leaving again…?" He Yu's voice was choked with sobs. "Are you leaving me again…?!"

It was a cloudy day. The light was weak, coming in through the heavy window glass, and there was no warmth to it. The thin, silver light gently outlined the two figures like frost, as fragile as dew on branches in early spring, melting at a single touch. Xie Qingcheng's back and neck were warm as he was hugged tightly from behind. The steam from the kitchen was hot, and so were He Yu's heart, his tears, and the bowl of pear soup that he had clumsily cooked for him. At such a temperature, Xie Qingcheng's heart couldn't manage to freeze; it turned into an ocean instead, blurring his vision.

"Please don't leave me, Xie Qingcheng… Don't leave me… I can't love anyone else anymore," He Yu sobbed. "I've given you my heart… Don't leave, Xie Qingcheng… Don't leave…"

Xie Qingcheng wanted more than anything to turn around and hug him. But he knew more clearly than ever that if he hugged him now, there was no turning back. When his organs failed and he died, He Yu's agony would be even greater than this. The little puppy on the side of the road chased the human, not understanding why he didn't look back, why he didn't stop. Its heartbroken whimpering bore deeply into the human's heart.

"…"

It hurt.

It hurt so much.

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes, and a tear finally slid from the corner of the azure dragon's eye. It was his last drop of warmth before his heart descended into ice and snow. The tear fell to the ground, and He Yu never noticed. He didn't say anything else. He lifted his slightly chilly hand and gently patted the boy's hand where it rested on his waist. Then, breaking free from He Yu's warmth, he pushed the door open, and walked toward the frigid road.

He didn't look back.

Chapter 161:
Slowly Separating

IT WAS VERY HARD to give someone up.

He Yu continued to try and find Xie Qingcheng and speak with him, but Xie Qingcheng had made up his mind not to have anything to do with him anymore. Distancing yourself from someone was like curing a disease. If you hesitated, fumbled the dosage, or gave up halfway, it would only get much worse when it flared up again.

He Yu came to sit in on his classes. Xie Qingcheng let him do as he wished, but he never looked at him.

He Yu would send him messages. He saw them, but he'd never reply.

When He Yu got off school and tried coming over to his dorm, Xie Qingcheng would keep the door closed, refusing to let him come any closer.

Xie Qingcheng did continue to monitor the figures coming from the bracelet; he'd stopped interacting with He Yu, but he didn't wish for him to flare up because of it. So he only ignored He Yu instead of forcing him to keep his distance. As long as he still had somewhere to focus his emotions, the bracelet stayed orange instead of bright red. He could take it slow, Xie Qingcheng thought. One day, it would surely turn all blue. There was no way He Yu would wait for him for a lifetime.

He began to tidy his room. There were items there that didn't belong to him, and it was best to deal with them as soon as possible. It wasn't as obvious before he started to clean, but once he actually rolled up his sleeves and got to work, he realized how much stuff He Yu had left behind. There were several of his books and even his homework on the desk. Looking through it, he found that He Yu completed his work very diligently indeed. His handwriting was clear and smooth, and he almost always got an A+.

There were a pair of *Zootopia* mugs in the kitchen, one for Nick the fox and the other for the dumb bunny. He Yu had wanted to go to Disneyland very badly; he'd even invited Xie Qingcheng to come with him. But Xie Qingcheng thought amusement parks were boring, a waste of money and time, and so He Yu had to go on his own. He'd brought these mugs back with him and insisted that Xie Qingcheng keep them in his dorm. He'd never once spared a thought for decorating his bedroom in his own villa, but he insisted on dumping all these things in Xie Qingcheng's living space.

The greatest offender was the arcade machine in the corner of his living room. When it was delivered, he was convinced it'd been a mistake—this was a teaching dormitory. He didn't have any use for a flatscreen TV. And then the delivery person had told him it was an arcade machine. He scowled as soon as he caught sight of the name on the address, immediately dialing He Yu's number. *What the heck are you trying to do?* He Yu had said that this was the newest model, one with two-player mode. Great for stress relief.

But it sat there gathering dust since the day it arrived. They'd never played any games together on it.

Xie Qingcheng dealt with all of it. He helped the uncle who collected used goods move everything onto his truck, and when he returned home, the emptiness

of his room struck him to the core. It could almost be described as spartan.

Everything had been tidied up.

Xie Qingcheng stood in the living room for a moment, before walking into the bedroom. There, he found a single straggler—a *Pokémon* blind box toy sitting on his bedside cabinet. He Yu had picked it up at a bookstore one day, and when he opened it, he'd found a Charmander inside. He placed it right there on the bedside drawer.

"You get chilly easily, don't you? It'll warm you up."

Xie Qingcheng looked up from his book. "It's not real."

He Yu walked up behind his chair with a smile and wrapped his arms around his shoulders. "Well, I am. I can warm your bed for a year straight, for free."

Xie Qingcheng tossed the Charmander into the garbage, and the little flame decoration on its tail broke off. It lay in the garbage bag, the smile on its face somehow looking miserable. He stared at it in silence. A minute later, he plucked it out and carefully glued the flame back onto its tail, placing it back by his bed.

It was June, during summer storm season. Huzhou grew hot and stuffy, and thunderstorms brewed frequently in the afternoon.

He Yu still came often to the ground floor of Xie Qingcheng's dorm. To keep from bothering him, he would stay far away on the other side of the road—from that vantage point, he could see into the apartment's study. He always did his class prep and material organizing there. First-years in Huzhou University's writing and directing program ended their evening self-study sessions at 8:30 p.m., so He Yu would usually get to Xie Qingcheng's school around 9:00 p.m. He'd watch him like that, keeping him company until around 11:00 p.m,, when he'd send him a text.

"Ge, it's late. Stop working and get some rest. Goodnight."

He was more punctual than an alarm clock.

It was raining very badly that day; hardly anyone was out and about on the huge school campus. Xie Qingcheng assumed he wouldn't come tonight, so he went to open the window and have a smoke—but before his fingertips even brushed the glass, he caught sight of He Yu standing there, umbrella in hand.

Their eyes met.

Wearing his glasses, he saw everything quite clearly. The downpour was so torrential that He Yu's umbrella was barely serving its purpose; he was soaking wet. Standing there dripping from head to toe, just to make sure that Xie Qingcheng turned off the lights and went to sleep instead of grinding into the early hours of morning. In that moment, he was convinced of the truth of He Yu's words—how could he be so cruel?

But he had no other choice.

His health was steadily deteriorating. One day, when he woke up to fits of coughing, he'd found blood on the white handkerchief he used to cover his mouth. He visited Meiyu for his most thorough examination yet, and there was no room in the results for the slightest sliver of optimism. He arrived home and went through Qin Ciyan's notes again, estimating how much time he'd need to organize the rest and do his own experiments. All to complete the research that had been destroyed—

he was sure there was enough time, just not enough for slacking off.

He had to hurry up, finish his search for a cure for Lao-Qin's daughter. However—

"Xie-sheng."

One night, he received a call from Qin Rongbei's husband. He was an American who had studied in Hong Kong, so there was a touch of old-fashioned Hong Kong dialect to his Mandarin; he called him "Xie-sheng" instead of "Mister Xie."

The mysterious organization had kidnapped Qin Rongbei; they'd tortured her, threatened her, and experimented on her. They'd made a ruin of her.

Though Xie Qingcheng had decided to use RN-13 again, and to experiment on his own body, time was running out for his efforts to create a drug that could stop Qin Rongbei's organs from failing. The treatment could only alter her constitution; it had failed to have the effect they'd hoped for. Her illness had worsened ever since last year; drugs could lessen her suffering, but they couldn't improve her condition.

There was something ominous in the air as he picked up the phone.

On the other end was the voice of Qin Rongbei's husband, hoarse with the effort of restraining his grief. "Xie-sheng, my wife passed away early this morning. It was very peaceful. Thank you so much for all you've done for her these last few years…"

His ears kept ringing even after he'd hung up.

Xie Qingcheng walked out to the balcony, studying the misty rain outside. It was the same weather as the day he'd attended Qin Ciyan's funeral. He lit his cigarette. He wanted to smoke it, but for some reason, he couldn't raise his hand to his mouth. As if his arm had frozen over. He stood there numb for a very long time, until the cigarette went out.

Qin Rongbei had been a professor, a scientist. Xie Qingcheng never knew if she'd learned some of the secrets of the First Emperor from her father. Later on, he was inclined to think that she must have, because her husband had gone through her notes from before she was driven mad and found a great deal of research on RN-13 patients. But after she was taken captive, forced to undergo so much torment, she wouldn't breathe a word.

Other than that, her husband had found a painting of hers while going through her things. It was a painting of herself, her parents, her husband and her daughter, and her younger brother who'd died in a car crash. There was another man whose features she'd left blurry, standing beside her father and wearing the same medical white coat. Qin Rongbei had used such gentle brushstrokes; she kept this painting tucked in the photo album she brought from China.

In the notes, she'd written two crooked words in pale blue ink: *My Family.*

Xie Qingcheng tried to light another cigarette with one shaking hand, but he couldn't even work the lighter. Night fell. Pitch-black darkness swallowed him whole.

After Qin Rongbei's death, Xie Qingcheng visited the Huzhou cemetery again.

He brought two bouquets with him, and left one at Chen Man's brother Chen Lisheng's grave. Chen Man had fully recovered, and his family kept strict watch over him. His parents were terrified he'd take another stupid risk, so they had bodyguards follow him wherever he went—he was completely infuriated, but Xie Qingcheng thought this was a fine thing indeed. He didn't want to see Chen Man come to any more harm.

He didn't manage to place the other bouquet down.

There were mourners at Qin Ciyan's grave. He saw them from a distance and recognized a few as old colleagues from Huzhou First Hospital, so he turned with his white lilies in hand and went back down the long mountain steps. In the end, he left the flowers at the entrance of the cemetery and turned to leave—but someone else picked up the bouquet. It was He Yu.

"Xie Qingcheng."

No answer came.

"You wanted to bring these to him, didn't you? Hold on, I'll go place them at his grave for you."

Before he could reply, He Yu took those pristine blooms to Qin Ciyan's statue and very solemnly placed them down. He bowed three times, very deeply. Xie Qingcheng stood in the drizzling rain and watched.

By the time He Yu reached the mountain gates, though, Xie Qingcheng was long gone. He could only make out his slim silhouette. He might've been mistaken, but he could have sworn that Xie Qingcheng's health was getting worse and worse. He kept seeing him cough, and he was always running off to Meiyu—and it clearly couldn't be to see Xie Xue, because she'd recovered.

It was particularly noticeable at the cemetery today. In the sunlight, his face had been so pale as to resemble a transparent wisp of soul, or a sheen of mist on the ocean. As if he would disappear at a single breath.

Xie Qingcheng was now living only to finish Qin Ciyan's work. All of his other relationships had faded into the distance. Of course, he hoped that the "Duan Wen" whom Jiang Liping had mentioned would be caught, but this was only wishful thinking. Duan Wen was elusive; though the head of an international company, he remained mysteriously unseen. Zheng Jingfeng and the others had investigated and found, just as they'd expected, that his name and his identity were false.

Xie Qingcheng's parents had been dead for nineteen years; on the anniversary of their deaths this year, it would be a full two decades. These twenty years had passed in the blink of an eye. Countless people had worn themselves to the bone, so many heads gone from black to white, but justice never came. The culprit was still free from the hands of the law, and none of the policemen's deaths had been redressed. The pursuit of forbidden drugs like RN-13 continued in the shadows. In these dire straits, Xie Qingcheng held out for twenty years.

And now, in the twentieth year, Qin Rongbei had passed. Xie Qingcheng no longer found it terribly painful or impossible to bear. He was now completely at peace, because he knew he drew closer to them with every passing day. In a few years at most, he would move on to join them. The only question was—he'd done all that he possibly could, but he'd still failed to bring the truth to light. When they met in the other world, would they be disappointed in him?

Another week passed. That weekend, Xie Qingcheng went with Xie Xue and Auntie Li to pay their respects to Xie Ping and Zhou Muying. His parents hadn't been buried in the same cemetery as Qin Ciyan. They'd been interred in a very small graveyard to the west of the city, one for ordinary civilians.

After sweeping the tomb, the three of them returned to Moyu Alley, where Xie Xue and Xie Qingcheng had dinner with Auntie Li.

"Ge, are you coming back to the dorms tonight?" Xie Xue asked, once they were done with their meal. "If you are, we can get a ride together and save on gas…"

He didn't reply. It was obvious that something was weighing heavily on his heart.

He helped Auntie Li with the dishes, and then looked up as he was wiping his hands. "Xie Xue, come to the room with me first. We have to talk."

Xie Xue felt faintly uneasy. Xie Qingcheng hadn't called her in and sat her down for a talk so gravely like this since she was a child. "Ge, what's going on?"

He poured two cups of tea and sat down. "It's not a big deal. Sit down."

She sat apprehensively on the very edge of the chair.

Her brother handed her a hot cup of tea. After a beat, he finally spoke. "Xie Xue, you're an adult now. You're not always going to live with me." He paused. The patriarchal Father Xie still found it awkward to discuss such things with his sister. But it wasn't like he had a choice. He had been spending his time making preparations for all his posthumous matters, and of course that included Xie Xue's future husband.

A few seconds passed. "…Are you looking for a boyfriend?" he asked stiffly.

"Huh?"

"I've picked out a few potential candidates," he said. "They make a decent living, and I've made note of what their personalities are like. Pencil out some time next week, and if you don't see any issues, you should meet them and have a look for yourself."

Chapter 162:
Dogshit Brother-in-Law

XIE XUE PALED in shock; she'd never thought her brother would sit her down to talk about this.

"Um…I…I haven't…"

"You're twenty-five this year," said Xie Qingcheng. "You're not a child anymore. I've planned things out—you should find a significant other by the end of this year, and spend a certain amount of time interacting with and getting to know him. By the time you hit twenty-six or twenty-seven, that'll pretty much be time for marriage. Now is a good time to start. If you end up dissatisfied, we can take our time picking out another. I'm sure it will be wrapped up before you hit thirty."

He'd mapped this out carefully. If Xie Xue got married two years from now, she'd probably have a child by the third year. Then he could still help her out. The first two years after birth were the hardest; Zhou Muying had gone through that toil with her in the past. After those two years, he'd probably run out of time. If he passed around then, the child wouldn't remember their uncle very much, and Xie Xue would have a life completely of her own with a whole new baby to keep her company. The grief of losing a family member would slowly smooth over.

It would be best if everything went exactly to plan.

"The first is an engineer at the school of irrigation systems. He's 176 centimeters tall, and his personality—"

She waved her hands, cutting him off before he could finish. "Ge, I'm fine. I-I don't like him."

"Is he too short for you?" he asked. "I've met him before. He's a good man with decent looks. You can just meet up with him—take it as making a friend."

"I'm good, really!"

"There's a taller one on the list, 188 centimeters, but he's a doctor like I used to be, so he's very busy and needs to work night shifts. That's why…"

"I don't like him either!"

He paused, raising his eyebrows. "Then what kind of man do you have in mind?"

She froze. "I…I don't like matchmaking dates. I don't want to go on any."

He sighed. "I'm not trying to force you to get married so soon, but it's the natural course of things once you reach a certain age. You should be getting out there and meeting new people. I know matchmaking dates aren't very romantic, but it's a very effective way of meeting a significant other. What about this? If you're seriously uninterested in the men I've picked out, tell me what you want and I'll prepare a new list."

Xie Xue flushed. She truly didn't dare to tell her brother about Wei Dongheng.

She wasn't a coward. It was just that that bastard boyfriend of hers would really be testing her brother's absolute bottom line. The traits he most despised in boys were dyed or permed hair, pierced ears, studded and sequined clothing, skipping class, and street racing… Wei Dongheng had done it all, *and* he was a student at Huzhou University. She wasn't his teacher, so it wasn't exactly a teacher-student relationship, but still—Xie Qingcheng was much too rigid for that. He'd definitely consider it an immoral affair.

She was worried that if she dared to say, "Ge, I'm dating Wei Dongheng, and it's serious enough that we've already discussed marriage," he would roll up his sleeves and break Wei Dongheng's neck.

"Ge," she managed to get out, "you shouldn't stress about my love life. I can deal with my own business. I-instead of worrying about me, you might as well go find yourself a new saozi…"

Xie Qingcheng scowled and slammed his hand down on the table. "Don't poke your nose in adult business."

"…Don't poke your nose in children's business," she muttered.

He glared at her. Just as he was going to sternly rebuke his sister, he felt a tightness in his chest. A spate of violent coughing consumed him. In its wake, all that sternness disappeared. Those furrowed brows only held wan exhaustion.

His coughing, and the sick redness of his peach-blossom eyes, made Xie Xue anxious. She got up and carefully patted him on the back, handing him the cup of tea. "Ge, you keep coughing like this. Is it a big deal? Have you been to the hospital yet?"

"…It's nothing." Xie Qingcheng coughed again.

"And you're worrying about me? I'm worried about you. If I'm married, who will take care of you when you're sick?" she wheedled. "Look at the way you smoke and stay up late, as if you have all the time in the world… To be honest, Gege, I really would prefer you find me a new saozi. She doesn't have to be particularly stunning; someone who could look after you and truly care for you would be enough. That way, I could rest easy too."

He closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Okay. If you're really against it, then I'll keep you company. Let me stay with you for a few years, all right? Don't be in such a hurry to marry me off." She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and nuzzled her brother like a cat. "Gege, don't worry about me. I promise you I'll take good care of myself, okay?"

He couldn't keep pushing her after that. He just sighed and waved her off. Xie Xue was too scared to stay behind. She made up an excuse about something urgent at school and took off.

She'd grown up, and out of his control. Xie Qingcheng was worried, but there wasn't anything he could do. He was usually so quick and decisive, but when it was someone he truly cared about, he could never actually force the matter. He thought about how to phrase things, made apologetic calls to every one of those young men he'd contacted, and got ready to go back to school himself.

But while he was tidying up, he realized that she'd left in such a hurry that she'd forgotten her purse. The pink cat bag was still hanging on the wall.

“How am I supposed to believe that you’ll take care of yourself?” he muttered. “You leave the house like a goddamn three-year-old—how could you forget your bag?”

Xie Qingcheng coughed as he rose to his feet, taking Xie Xue’s bag and calling a car back to the teaching dormitories of Huzhou University. *Brrring!* When he was halfway there, the phone in the bag started ringing. Communicating with students was a huge part of Xie Xue’s teaching job, so she had two phones in order to keep her work and personal life separate. The one she usually used was her personal phone, and the one in her bag was the backup.

Annoyed, he picked it up to reject the call—but the sight of the caller ID made Xie Qingcheng briefly lose his ability to speak.

Call From: Babe.

Like many parents of daughters, he paid close attention to suspicious calls like these. Raising his brows, he hesitated for a moment before tapping the green icon and picking up “Babe’s” call. He said nothing. “Babe” spoke first.

“Hello? Xie Xue, I called you on your other phone—why didn’t you pick up? Did you leave it on mute? Do you have to mute it every time you go home to see your ge? It makes it seem like we’re doing something terrible.”

That crisp voice clearly belonged to a young man with few inhibitions. “Babe” was talkative and impulsive; he yammered nonstop. Xie Qingcheng’s expression darkened. Something ominous filled his heart. Holding the phone in hand, he crossed his legs and leaned back against the taxi seats, listening to the dumbfuck on the other side prattle away thoughtlessly.

“Honestly, your ge is sooo… It’s the 21st century. What’s so bad about dating a younger guy? And he got so angry last time you tried giving him hints to see what he thought… Ah, whatever. Where are you? Why don’t I come pick you up?”

Xie Qingcheng stayed silent, letting this platinum-level dumbass keep on yapping.

“It’s so late—don’t head back to your dorm. Come over to my apartment instead. By the way, the sex toys we ordered arrived. You can try them out when you get back…”

At this point, the elder brother couldn’t bear another second. His expression was beyond all description—what the hell was this? What the hell was going on? Fucking—who? What bastard son of a bitch was this?! What toys?

His heart was pounding, his vision going dark. His fingers went white as he tightened his grip on his phone, knuckles creaking. He had the look of a young father whose child had not only failed an exam but forged his signature and lied to get away with it. He wanted nothing more than to summon Xie Xue, kick her to the ground, and start whipping away. This was…fucking absurd!

He leaned back against the seat, suppressing the desire to cough. He ground his teeth, face nearly green, for a very long while, lifting a hand to his temple in silence. Slowly, the dumbfuck on the other end realized something was off.

“Hello? Xie Xue? Why haven’t you said anything? …Hello? Did something happen? …Hello? Xie Xue, don’t scare me like this. Say something?!”

Eventually, Xie Qingcheng finally spoke up. His voice was colder than the harshest winter, enough to terrify Wei Dongheng out of his wits. “Which fucking

brat are you?" he snapped, every word crushed between his teeth. "Your filthy mouth—are you asking me to teach you a lesson?!"

Wei Dongheng hadn't realized what was happening yet. "Huh? Who the hell are you? I'm talking to Xie Xue, not you! Give her the phone."

"Fuck the phone, I'm her brother!" he hissed in response.

Wei Dongheng fell into a flabbergasted, shocked, and utterly speechless silence.

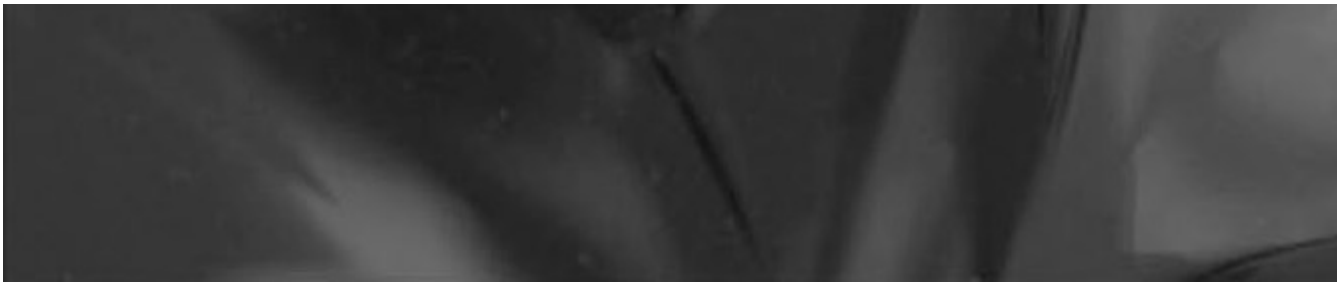
Beep, beep, beep…

He hung up instantly.

Swearing, Xie Qingcheng threw the phone aside. He immediately called Xie Xue, who didn't pick up. He used his own phone to dial "Babe's" number, but "Babe" didn't pick up either. Mindless with fury, he got Zheng Jingfeng on the phone.

"Get me all the information on this brat right now!"

Zheng Jingfeng burst out laughing once he'd heard the whole story. "Xiao-Xie," he consoled him, "as I see it, you're in the wrong here. Your sister having a boyfriend is totally normal. Don't get too involved."



"What's normal?" He couldn't say too much in the taxi, but his scowl deepened. "…She's done such shameless things with him! She's a little girl!"

"What do you mean, shameless?! It's 2022. Sexual activity is completely normal in relationships. Xie Qingcheng, wake up. You need to be more open-minded; you have to talk to your sister properly. What's most important is for her to be safe."

He nearly leapt to his feet inside the car. "Open-minded?! It's not your daughter!"

"Aiya, I see Xiao-Xue as my own…" The police officer was chuckling. "This is a good thing, isn't it? They're so passionate with each other… Young love is so beautiful…"

Xie Qingcheng swore and hung up.

Then he called Chen Man.

"Huh? Pull up someone's personal information using their phone number… Sure, but it's against the rules. Ge, is there something urgent going on?"

He thought about it. Chen Man and Zheng Jingfeng were different, after all. He could rant about Xie Xue's love life to Zheng Jingfeng, but doing that with Chen Man wouldn't be appropriate. In the end, having failed to come up with any reasonable excuse, he hung up.

He swiped to He Yu's number.

He knew He Yu wouldn't ask if he called him, that he would definitely tell him what he wanted to know. But…he tossed his phone aside. Enough of that.

The driver glanced at him through the rearview mirror. "Dage," he said, very tactfully. "You don't like that your sister is dating someone, right?"

"…She's being ridiculous!" Xie Qingcheng got out his cigarettes.

"Ha, the way I see it, you shouldn't be too anxious. I see this all the time when I'm driving people around; the more parents are against it, the tighter the kids cling on. If the parents don't care, ah, then it dies out. After all, think of yourself when you were young." The driver was very good at putting himself in someone else's shoes. "Everyone goes through those passionate teenage years. Falling in love, starting a relationship, doing certain things… It's definitely understandable. The most important thing is making sure the girl knows how to keep herself safe."

Xie Qingcheng didn't want to talk about this anymore. Passionate teen years… No matter how passionate or teenaged he had been, he'd never done anything like this! When he and Li Ruoqiu were dating, he'd only held her hand—he'd never taken the initiative for so much as a kiss. They'd only consummated their marriage on the wedding night itself. Of course he had the right to feel that Xie Xue's behavior was—

Midway through that thought, he thought of He Yu. There seemed to be a mocking voice asking him, *Sure, you never had premarital sex with Li Ruoqiu, but what about all those things you did with He Yu?* The things he'd done with that male student, a boy who hadn't even completed his bachelor's degree—on his wedding bed, in the outdoor parking lot, in the young man's house, in a school bathroom, in a school changeroom…

Reflect on yourself. What right do you have to lecture your sister?

Xie Qingcheng deflated. He held his head in anxious despair, angry and aggrieved. What had he done wrong? Why had Xie Xue kept something so important from him?! Eyes red, hand over his forehead, he let the driver carry on giving him advice.

His phone rang. When he looked down, he saw that it was “Babe” calling. “Babe” really did have some guts. Xie Qingcheng’s hands were shaking from sheer rage.

“Hello?” His voice was even colder than before, and hoarse to boot.

Babe spoke up. “…Professor. Xie.”

“Get to the fucking point.” Every word came grating out of his mouth.

“Y-you mustn’t scold Xie Xue,” said Babe. “I’ll explain everything.”

“What business is it of yours if I scold her? Who the fuck are you?”

The man on the phone fell silent. Xie Xue’s “Babe” confessed, his anxiety audible through the speaker; Young Master Wei’s reputation was so bad he found it shameful to introduce himself at all. “H-h-hello, Professor… I…I’m…Wei Dongheng.”

Xie Qingcheng nearly fainted with rage.

Chapter 163:
So Mad You Pass Out

BY THE TIME Xie Qingcheng finished his call with Wei Dongheng, he'd arrived at his destination. He wanted to go find Xie Xue and demand an explanation, but he was so tired that all he could manage was to go back to his dorm and sit down for a long time.

Xie Xue was such a headache, he thought. After his initial shock and fury, all that was left in his heart was sadness. What was she doing?

He only had five fucking years left to live—he'd thought those five years would be more than enough to set her up properly, but who would've thought she'd be so willful in matters of love? Who the hell was this guy? Wei Dongheng, the cherished baby of the Wei family. Forget his terrible personality—drinking at eight, skipping class at ten, getting into fights by fifteen and nearly ending up in juvie—the mere fact that he hadn't landed himself in jail yet made you wonder if his luck came at the price of eight generations of good karma, carefully accumulated by bygone Wei family ancestors toiling away in the underworld for his sake!

"I hate Wei Dongheng!"

"Once I grow up and start earning the big bucks, I'll definitely hire a whole gang to beat him to death!"

"Gege! Wei Dongheng was mean to me… Waaahhhhh!"

He'd heard no end of complaints about Wei Dongheng while Xie Xue was growing up. He remembered a time when Wei Dongheng and his buddies had made fun of her in front of everyone until she burst into furious tears and ran back home to dive into his arms. He'd been so upset he ran right to Wei Dongheng's school.

"Provoke her again and I'll break your fingers! I don't care who the hell your parents are!"

She watched from beside him. Xie Qingcheng left Wei Dongheng's little lackeys sobbing pathetically, and the little middle-schooler man himself had also been beaten bloody. But he only stuck his hands into his pockets like a sleaze, leaning jauntily back against the white-tiled wall. "What about it, huh?" he said with a jerk of his swollen chin. "You're the one in the wrong here—did I beat on her at all? Is your sister a fragile little princess? I can't even be bothered to look at her. My friends were only kidding around, and you're blaming it all on me?"

His breath was faintly tinged with cigarette smoke. It wasn't a full stink coming off of him, but it was nevertheless a ridiculously blatant violation of the rules. It was very clear he'd just been doing something illegal.

Wei Dongheng sneered. "Doctor Xie, do you think I'm He Yu? He might do everything you ask, but I'm not like him. I'm not a dog to be trained as you like."

When he cocked his head, Xie Qingcheng caught sight of the five piercings on his ear. Two of them were across his cartilage. This was a boy who insisted on making a mess of all that was proper, even if he had to hurt himself to do so.

How could they have ended up together?

Anger made the veins at Xie Qingcheng's temples pulse. He reached up and forcefully massaged the back of his neck before pacing around his dorm. After a few cigarettes, he finally started to calm down. Finally, he picked up his phone and called Xie Xue.

This time, the call went through. "Hello? Ge? I was in the shower. I didn't hear you call. What's up?"

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes. "You left your backup phone at home."

"Aiya! …I really did! What do I do…"

"I brought it for you," he said. "It's with me. I'm at Huzhou Medicine."

He was stunned by his own capacity to suppress his anger. He answered her questions, and while she anxiously responded with "Then I'll come over right now," he took a deep breath.

"Xie Xue, I have a question for you."

"Oh, go ahead."

"When did you and Wei Dongheng start dating?"

"Ages ago…" She spoke without thinking, and only realized her mistake halfway through the sentence. She stopped her confession midway with a hiccup, and her voice took on an audible note of fear. "Ge…wait… How did you… How…"

"How did I find out?" He had always been stern with his sister, and when he was angry, he was domineering, oppressive, even tyrannical. "That doesn't concern you. Break up with him right now."

"I will not!"

Xie Qingcheng had picked up another cigarette and was clicking the metal lighter in his hand. Hearing Xie Xue's reply, he froze and nearly burned himself. His eyes widened slightly. He must have been mistaken. It wasn't like he'd never been defied by his own junior before, and sometimes he'd even lose the fight terribly. But never with Xie Xue. She very rarely dared to say no to him—this might even count as the first time she'd ever done so.

He couldn't help coughing. "What did you say?"

"I…I said I won't. I won't break up with him. I love him."

Closing his eyes, he threw the lighter aside. The cigarette was still in his hand; there was a callus on his index finger from how much writing he did, and he kneaded the filter against it. He took a deep breath, realizing that he couldn't hold it in anymore, after all.

"Xie Xue, is there something wrong with your head?!" he snarled, those peach-blossom eyes flying open. "You love him? Why don't you just say you're gay instead?! You could love anyone in the world and you pick a sissy? Look at him—he can't sit or stand right! He has more piercings than a girl! You love him? Have you lost your mind? Who's been telling me for all these years that he's a piece of shit? You, wasn't it? Are you bewitched or something? Do I need to refer you to an optometrist? Don't you know what kind of guy he is? Have you two ever thought about your future? He's going to get himself thrown in jail sooner or later—when that time comes, are you going to bring him his meals every day? Or get yourself thrown in with him to be a proper prison couple?! You must be insane!"

Xie Xue felt like her eardrums were bursting. She clutched at her ears and did her best to endure his rapid-fire scolding. She was used to being berated by her brother like this, and very conscientiously filtered out all of his demeaning comments. She shrank in on herself. “But, Ge, I’m in my early twenties now,” she said softly. “I have my own thoughts and opinions.”

Xie Qingcheng was so angry he was about to have a stroke. He reached up and viciously massaged his temples, afraid he might pass out. His whole impassioned tirade was as futile as a fist slammed into cotton stuffing. His sister knew him too well. More than two decades of experience made her well aware that fighting with her enraged brother would get her nothing, so she reflexively started to wheedle at him sweetly.

“And, Ge, Wei Dongheng’s changed a lot,” she went on. “You’ve never really talked to him before. You don’t know that he’s a good person—he’s frank and very simple, a bit dumb too… When…when he bullied me when we were kids, it was just to get my attention… He’s never even had a girlfriend before…”

Now that she couldn’t hide it, her only choice was to pathetically try to explain things. “I’ve met his friends, too. They made fun of him, said he was watching *Meteor Garden* and got obsessed with Daoming Si, so he was copying F4[2]… He thought the best way to get his crush’s attention was to dye his hair and bully her. I only found out afterward…”

Her brother wasn’t listening. “I don’t care if he copies F40, you need to break up with him right now! Listen, Xie Xue, you need to wake up! He’s not a good match for you, and this is one thing where you have to do as I say. You can date anyone else in the world but him!”

“…No way, Gege. You really…you really shouldn’t be so biased against him…” She was on the verge of tears. “Yes, I’m your sister, but I’m an independent girl with a job and her own thoughts and opinions. I trust that I know who he really is, and we’ve been dating for a long time. You can’t just—”

“I don’t want to hear any of this useless nonsense. I’m telling you to break up with him for your own good. It’s my duty as your older brother,” snapped Xie Qingcheng. “Your childish games end here! Go break up with him right now!”

Tears started flowing down her face. “No… I’ve liked him for so many years, and only just managed to muster up the courage to confess. That’s how I found out he liked me all along, but didn’t dare tell me… We only want to be with each other…”

His vision started going dark. His chest felt stuffy. Elder brothers were like fathers, and he and Xie Xue had been left on their own very young. He felt very vividly the unique fury of a father faced with a son-in-law he misliked. With his blood pressure rising and his ears ringing, he just managed to catch the key detail that she’d “mustered up the courage to confess.” Quite honestly, he wanted to die. He couldn’t help but curse. “You’re the one who confessed? Crawling on all fours to get so low, huh?!”

Silence.

This was too much for Xie Xue. No matter how sweet her temper was, she couldn’t talk to him after that.

Xie Qingcheng sat down on his armchair and kneaded at the throbbing veins of his neck. Taking a breather, the dumb and despicable male chauvinist finally

realized his mistake. He hesitated, biting his lips and thinking about what to say. "You…"

"I…I don't want to talk to you anymore." Xie Xue's voice was very soft. Even through the electric receiver, it was clear she was upset. "Ge…I know you want the best for me, but talking to me like this…really…really makes me…" She choked up, hanging up before Xie Qingcheng could say sorry.

The sustained beeping of a busy signal was all that came through the phone.

Xie Qingcheng sat dazed in the chaotic signal noise, before throwing his phone aside and covering his eyes with his hands. In the dim light of the standing lamp, he sat there in silence for a very long time.

The two siblings didn't speak for days after that.

Xie Xue came by his dorm for her phone, but he had the same curse that afflicted all old-fashioned parents: Even if he felt guilty, there was no way he would take the initiative to talk to his junior after a fight. She shot him a few glances, but he just leaned against the sofa with his eyes closed and said nothing. In the end, she had to just take her backup phone and go.

Maybe because he was upset, or because of his constant worrying, his health worsened a great deal after that. He was so anxious that he'd forget to take his medicine.

Of course, apart from Xie Xue, he also had to worry about He Yu. He'd check the numbers on He Yu's monitor at regular intervals, hoping to one day see normal figures. But all he ever saw was a mess of dangerous orange. He didn't know if this was a good or a bad thing. He Yu kept himself in check and never lost control enough to show up as red; he didn't add more fuel to the flaming mess of Xie Qingcheng's life. But he still wouldn't let go of him, no matter what.

He kept coming to Xie Qingcheng's lectures, and kept standing beneath his dorm window. He'd come watch over him whenever he had the time to spare—he'd lasted this long, even while Xie Qingcheng never even acknowledged him. But Xie Qingcheng was starting to get fed up. Xie Xue, He Yu—why were these young ones always so insistent on having their way? Worried, of course he forgot to take his medicine again.

When sickness and anxiety accumulated to a certain level, breakdown was sure to follow. One day, Xie Qingcheng was halfway through his class when he suddenly felt faint. He wanted to grit his teeth and finish the lesson, but he failed—he wrote down the last few lines on the board, and then he turned and his vision went blurry. The world spun around him.

"Professor?!"

"Professor Xie! What's wrong?"

"Xie Qingcheng!"

In his delirium, Xie Qingcheng saw He Yu stand up from where he was listening in on the class in the very back row and run toward him. He was more worried than anyone else in the room. Maybe it was the fact that he just didn't care at all if people noticed the feelings he had for Xie Qingcheng reflected in his eyes. He didn't stop to think if anyone would find his reaction to the teacher passing out strange. Xie Qingcheng was desperate to avoid him, but the last thing he saw was He Yu pushing his way through the med school students around the podium. He

wrapped his arms around his shoulders right there in class, nestling Xie Qingcheng's head against his own shoulder.

"Where's the nurse's room?"

Xie Qingcheng's ears were ringing. He could faintly hear He Yu's voice, and the noise of the students pointing the way. Then he passed out.

He Yu was terribly anxious to see him like this. Though at first he was just holding him up, he decided to pick him up in a princess carry and run right out of the classroom. As soon as he did, lightbulbs flickered to life above the heads of two girls in the class with a ding.

Everyone thought He Yu came so diligently to the neighboring school and sat in on lectures because he had a crush on some pretty female student in the class, but all this time had passed without He Yu confessing to anyone. But when the professor fainted, this student who didn't even go here was so worried all the blood left his face—he picked up their teacher and ran off to the nurse as if he did this all the time.

“My roommate’s boyfriend wasn’t even this freaked out when she passed out after a miscarriage,” one of those two girls whispered to the classmate beside her. “Why do I feel like there’s something up with He Yu and Professor Xie…?”

The other student nodded. “He was so worked up,” she said thoughtfully. “And the way he looked at him was kind of…”

She didn’t finish her sentence. They exchanged knowing, anticipatory looks, and nodded.

They both remembered the same incident. Xie Qingcheng was someone who hardly ever posted on Moments. He only did so when he had to reshare certain work-related posts from official accounts, or when he felt there was a need for public service announcements. But one morning, as the students woke up, they discovered that Professor Xie had made a very strange post.

Xie Qingcheng: I keep getting rawed. Take care, everyone.

The students blew up, sharing screenshots through all the group chats, but no one dared to like the post or ask any questions. They thought he must’ve made the wrong selection and posted something meant for his private circle on his public list. All the post received was a very bland like and one single comment; not only were the students too afraid to reply, but even Xie Xue and Chen Man—regardless of what was going on in their heads—found it so absurd they didn’t dare interact with it. The only like was from He Yu, and the only comment was from the sales associate he’d added when he was buying skincare products for his sister:

“What a shame. I thought you were a top.”

Xie Qingcheng replied with a single *“?”*

This mystery remained until the next day, when he posted a recommendation for a humidifier. That was when the students realized that “rawed” must refer to the air drying out his throat.

Everyone went to comment.

“Hahahahahah, that’s right. Professor, it has been very dry.”

“My throat hurts every morning when I wake up, too.”

But now, having seen He Yu pick up Professor Xie like the ultimate boyfriend and go running in search of the nurse’s room, the two girls began to wonder if that post really should be read as being about “dry air” or…the other meaning…

“Is anyone there?” He Yu shouted as he reached the nurse’s office. “Professor Xie fainted!”

The school nurse came rushing over. “Here, I’m here! Hurry and put him down on the bed,” he instructed. “I’ll check his vitals.”

He Yu did as he was told, carefully carrying Xie Qingcheng into the sectioned off room and gently placing him down on the bed.

The nurse turned to He Yu as he prepared the testing tools. “Help me out.”

“What do you need me to do?”

“Take off his jacket.”

Chapter 164:
So Angry She Goes Insane

HE YU DIDN'T DARE to waste any time; he quickly did as the nurse said. He reached out to unbutton the coat and take it off, but halfway through, Xie Qingcheng groaned in his delirium and furrowed his brows.

"Don't," he murmured. "Don't…" Though his eyes were closed, his face was twisted in utter refusal.

"Don't worry, Ge," He Yu whispered, "he's just going to take a look. Don't be afraid."

Xie Qingcheng's handsome face was completely bloodless. His dark brows were tightly knit, and his fingers twitched as if trying to grab hold of his own clothing. Seeing him like this tore at He Yu's heart. He wanted nothing more than to slap himself in the face—he remembered Xie Qingcheng mentioning that he kept waking up in disgust from nightmares he was having after the nightclub incident. Were they still occurring…even now…?

He couldn't help but to reach up and stroke Xie Qingcheng's clammy cheeks. "Ge, don't be afraid… I won't ever again…"

The school nurse suddenly walked back in.

"Hello? I asked you to take his coat off. Why is it still on?" He waved He Yu off impatiently. "I'll do it."

The nurse moved very quickly. The coat came off, and he pulled out his stethoscope to begin a physical examination. Midway through, his gaze fell on Xie Qingcheng's wrist. "Huh? What's going on with his hand?"

Returning to his senses, He Yu looked. There was a pale line of text on his wrist; nothing else. "A tattoo," he said.

"Tsk. You really can never tell with some people. Professor Xie's so prim and proper, but he's got a tattoo on his wrist? He sure is wild on the inside, huh."

He Yu said absolutely nothing to that.

A whirl of activity followed, getting Xie Qingcheng on an IV and prescribing him meds. Half an hour later, he finally began to come to his senses. All he saw was perfect white. It took him a few seconds to understand that he was lying on the sickbed in the school infirmary.

He Yu was sitting by his side.

The infirmary at Huzhou School of Medicine was very large, boasting many private rooms. There was no one else in there with them; he was holding Xie Qingcheng's hand, keeping the one with the IV in it from taking on too much of a clammy chill.

"Xie-ge," He Yu said hastily as soon as he woke.

Xie Qingcheng blinked. The first thing he registered was that his coat had been taken off. His heart skipped a beat, and he immediately looked down at his wrist—thank goodness. He let out a breath of relief. It had been some time since his

last treatment, and there weren't any marks left on his skin. He was afflicted with a slow shutdown of his whole bodily system. The school infirmary would never be able to pick up on the truth.

"The nurse said it's probably low blood sugar," He Yu said to him, just as he expected. "Ge, have you not been eating properly?"

He sat up and said nothing. Looking down again, he pulled his hand from He Yu's grip. His palm was very warm—warm with what remained of He Yu's body temperature.

"…I'm fine. Have…have you been here all along?"

"Mn."

He coughed. "Then you'd better get back to your own school." Xie Qingcheng wrung his hands a little, as if holding onto something invisible. He coughed again before he continued. "People are going to notice if you keep following me around like this. It's inappropriate."

"But they've seen everything there is," he said. "I was the one who carried you to the sickbay."

Xie Qingcheng fell silent.

"You fell off the podium. How could I just stand there? Don't worry too much. It doesn't matter what they saw. They won't really think too much of it." He paused, and lowered his voice. "Who cares if they do think something of it? It's not like it proves anything."

In truth, his behavior was quite conspicuous. There were many male students there, all of them in medicine, but none got as worked up as this guy who was only sitting in. Of course, he was also right. Even if people grew suspicious, what was there to say without evidence? At worst they'd hand He Yu an award certificate for being such a morally courageous and respectful student.

Xie Qingcheng sighed and leaned back against the bed, utterly exhausted. He'd really been under too much stress lately, and he was completely drained of his strength. If He Yu refused to leave, he'd just close his eyes and try to rest.

"I brought you red bean porridge," said He Yu. "I added honey. Will you please have some?"

He turned away. Refusing. So He Yu put down the disposable container and lowered his head.

He was hardly glad to see him like this. He Yu had also been worn down recently, and the monitoring bracelet on his wrist was near completely orange. It never went any lower. Xie Qingcheng took note of it, but didn't know how to help He Yu feel at ease. He couldn't tell if He Yu's business or Xie Xue's weighed heavier on his heart.

The mood in the room stayed terribly low for a very long time. Thankfully, because he was so young and so infatuated with the man before him, a fire still burned in He Yu's heart, and that was enough to animate him somewhat. After a beat, He Yu forcefully picked himself up and chose a new conversation topic, one that Xie Qingcheng would more likely want to talk about.

"Um…Ge, about Xie Xue… How she's dating Wei Dongheng… I already know."

Just as he expected, Xie Qingcheng moved. He glanced at He Yu out of the corner of his eye, and after a few more moments, he spoke up. “How did you find out?”

“Everyone in our circle’s been talking about it. Wei Dongheng already told his family everything.” Now that Xie Qingcheng was finally acknowledging his existence, his eyes lit up again.

Anger flared in Xie Qingcheng. “He told them *everything*? What a—” He started coughing.

He Yu immediately went to pat his back. “Don’t worry too much,” he said. “It’s not like you worrying will do anything.”

Eyes red from the force of his cough, Xie Qingcheng glared at He Yu. “She’s not your sister. Of course you’re not worried.”

“No way. You care, so of course I do too.” He Yu got up and poured him a cup of hot water. “But in this day and age, dating is all free choice. If she’s set on being with Wei Dongheng, there’s nothing you can do about it. And once they go get the marriage certificates, they’ll be a lawfully wedded couple, protected by the justice system. What will you do then?”

He Yu kept massaging his back as he consoled him. “Ge, I think you should ease up. It’s not good for you to be like this…”

Xie Qingcheng sensed something wrong. Logically speaking, He Yu had grown up with Xie Xue; he should’ve heard her talk about how much she hated Wei Dongheng. He should’ve been at least a little bewildered to see them together, but instead he seemed very calm. Xie Qingcheng frowned. “…Why does it seem like… you’ve known for a long time already?”

He Yu fell silent.

“Did Xie Xue tell you?”

“No,” said He Yu quickly. “I swear.”

Xie Qingcheng held his tongue.

“…To be honest, I figured it out by myself,” He Yu admitted. It wasn’t like he could tell Xie Qingcheng about his crush on Xie Xue, after all. “When you love someone, there’s a light in your eyes you can’t hide.”

Xie Qingcheng ground his teeth. “What does she love about him? How is that Wei Dongheng at all a good match? A useless sack of nothing… How bad could her taste possibly be? There are so many men in the world, and she picks one like that!”

“It is what it is. Look at you, getting angrier the more you say.” He Yu persisted in trying to soothe him. “Don’t get angry anymore—it’s not going to change anything. And you can’t judge a book by its cover. Maybe…Wei Dongheng really does have some hidden strengths that other people don’t notice. Ge, you could try trusting Xie Xue, or maybe find an opportunity to have a good talk with her about these things. You absolutely mustn’t get so mad you don’t eat and don’t take care of yourself, okay?”

Xie Qingcheng said nothing.

At his silence, He Yu tried passing him the congee again. “Here, don’t overthink it. Have some food.”

"Just leave it there." He Yu had more to say, but Xie Qingcheng stiffly added, "You can go."

"Ge…"

"You must have class soon. The semester is ending. You should focus on your studies."

He Yu didn't want to agree, but this reminded him that he did have class, for a very important practical course. He checked his phone. He was indeed cutting it close; he had no choice but to leave. "Then…I'll go for now, and come back later. Okay?"

"There's no need for that."

He looked up at He Yu's face. He looked noticeably thinner. Treating a disease always went this way—it would always get worse before things got better. Xie Qingcheng knew it was very hard for He Yu to accept his rejection, but this stage was necessary. If he couldn't fix Xie Xue's issue, he had to at least do well by He Yu.

"Go," he said. "You shouldn't come sit in on my classes anymore, either. You're not a med school student. It's meaningless for you."

He Yu paused, falling silent. He watched Xie Qingcheng, the rims of his eyes shading red. Xie Qingcheng didn't know how many times he'd made He Yu cry by now. He could only sigh; everyone knew men shouldn't cry so easily. He Yu had always been terribly strong, composed, and even haughty in front of others—but with him, he always ended up in tears.

Xie Qingcheng looked away. After a beat, he repeated, "You should go."

"Ge…"

"I need to rest." He wouldn't look at him. The withdrawal stage felt slow, but it would come to an end eventually.

He Yu didn't realize that while it was one thing for *him* to cry in front of Xie Qingcheng, Xie Qingcheng couldn't let himself show the slightest discomfort before He Yu. He was bound by countless unseen burdens and chains—in the end, he felt he didn't even have the right to show how he truly felt anymore. He lay down, drawing the canopy and closing his eyes. He rubbed his wrist beneath the blanket. Thank goodness He Yu hadn't noticed this time…

In a certain hotel room in Huzhou, Lü Zhishu was sitting on the balcony, staring out at the busy Huangpu River and waiting for the hotel staff to finish plating her breakfast. She had just settled a business deal last night; they'd talked until very late, before she solicitously saw the client off to the airport. Too exhausted to go home, she had the driver take her to a hotel on the Bund instead.

She'd only just woken up. Still dressed in her bathrobe, she breathed in the smells of the city, drowsy-eyed and exhausted. When she sat down for breakfast, Executive Lü suddenly remembered a text she hadn't replied to last night, from the private investigator she'd hired. She had never wanted to hire anyone to track He Yu before, but she really couldn't find out exactly who had seduced him—there was nothing for it but hiring a private investigator. She'd warned the man several times over to be careful, to follow from a fair distance. Regardless of how long it took or how few results he attained, He Yu must never find out.

"Also, my son is a hacker. Don't bother using those so-called 'high-tech' surveillance devices on him. You must be absolutely vigilant."

The investigator had agreed, and thus spent much longer than usual on this matter.

Lü Zhishu hadn't had the time to reply last night. Now that she remembered, she instantly called the number back.

"Hello," she said, with her hand on her hip. "Have you found anything?"

"Yes, Executive Lü." For some reason, the man sounded hesitant. "We've… confirmed the identity of the person involved."

She sat bolt upright. "Who is it?"

"I…I've prepared some materials. Let me send them to your email first."

Pulling out her laptop, she opened her email as soon as she hung up, the message arriving mere seconds later. She clicked her mouse with one chubby hand, downloaded the file, unzipped it, opened it, and…

Smash!

The cup of tea that had been soothing her nerves slipped out of her hand, landing on the ground and shattering to bits. She paled—she couldn't bear to believe what she saw.

The investigator had put together some photos and video clips, the first of which was on a short-form video app, taken from inside a bar. There weren't very many likes on it, but he'd managed to dig it up regardless. In the video, a young man had his arms around another man, shoving him up against the bar and kissing him deep. People all around them were cheering them on. Because the young man had gone out of his way to keep his partner's face from view with his hand, Lü Zhishu couldn't tell who it was—but the younger of the two men had elegant features and was beautifully handsome. Who else could it be, if not He Yu?

The investigator had marked out the date it was filmed. Last fall, during the filming of *The Trial*. Below that were a few pictures.

From their clothing it was clear that these had been taken recently. There were pictures of He Yu and Xie Qingcheng looking at each other at the theater, one of He Yu with his arm around Xie Qingcheng's waist in front of a certain restaurant, and one on the field at Huzhou University, where they were sitting eating lunch together. He Yu stared at Xie Qingcheng with eyes softer than any male lead in a romance drama. One more was in the halls of Huzhou School of Medicine, where Xie Qingcheng had fainted for some reason and He Yu was carrying him toward the infirmary with visible anxiety.

Beneath that…was a video.

The tightly closed doors of a school changing room had become a conductor beating out the most primitive rhythm, one that could've come straight from the Garden of Eden. There was no way to see who was inside, but Lü Zhishu could hear He Yu's voice clearly. Though the other person was silent…

One more after—

Lü Zhishu's head rang. Her blood ran cold. The surveillance footage was very high resolution.

It was an outdoor parking lot, where the big Cullinan was parked. Its license plate was precisely the one she knew, and from the hidden camera angle, you could see that the doors weren't fully closed. He Yu was kissing someone in the back seat. In the storm, he hadn't noticed someone filming him, immersed as he was in their closeness. As the video played for a while longer, someone else's car drove in. He Yu realized he hadn't closed the door fully, so he got up and slammed it shut.

At this point, the investigation should've ended. But the private investigator often had to film the insides of cars, so his special lens could record even through the privacy screen in the car windows. The image only dimmed; what was going on inside the car remained clearly visible.

Lü Zhishu watched, her face bone-white, as He Yu leaned back against the car seats in a different position. The man who had been lying down got up and lowered his head and his gaze, cheeks flushed yet expression haughty as he reached out and wrapped his fingers in He Yu's tie. That tie was like a chain keeping him bound to mortal hungers. He pulled him close, head lowered to gaze at him, and said something softly—their faces drew close, both of them wearing expressions of dazed desire, before their mouths joined in a kiss.

And the one holding He Yu's tie, the one who'd orchestrated it all…was…a professor at the Huzhou School of Medicine, Xie Xue's gege…the man who'd once been He Yu's private doctor…

Xie Qingcheng!

How…how could it be him? How did…how did they end up doing…this…? Lü Zhishu felt as if she'd been struck by lightning; she couldn't believe this at all, but the evidence was right in front of her face. All those disjointed suspicions swept back into her head: She'd discovered He Yu buying condoms at Huzhou University, while the surveillance showed he hadn't met with any girl. He was only ever alone with Xie Qingcheng. He Yu had randomly put in a request to switch rooms while in production for *The Trial*, picking one that was right next to Xie Qingcheng's. And the time she opened the doors of the Cullinan and discovered a half-used Durex condom inside…

At the time, she wondered why He Yu had been so careless. Wasn't he worried about Xie Xue getting pregnant? Now she finally understood. He Yu didn't have to worry at all, because the one in his car hadn't been a girl. It'd been…Xie Qingcheng…a man!

She started shaking. She stared at the way Xie Qingcheng furrowed his brow and bit his lips in an expression of pain, while He Yu kept kissing him, over and over again. Even without sound, the dumbest person alive could tell that he was murmuring Xie Qingcheng's name with the utmost devotion. This was…this really was completely insane.

Lü Zhishu dared not tarry a moment longer. She got out her backup phone and plugged in that special SIM card before calling that special number. That person picked up.

Duan Wen's voice came through. "Hello."

"Hello, Executive Duan." She swallowed nervously. "There's something I just discovered that I need to report…"

Chapter 165:
One More for the Count

DUAN WEN WASN'T in Huzhou anymore; he was on a reef island in Australia when he received the call from Lü Zhishu.

The woman on the line was in a panicked flurry, hardly coherent as she recounted everything for him. As she did, she sent all the photos and videos of He Yu and Xie Qingcheng's trysts. But Duan Wen wasn't surprised by this at all, nor was he astonished at the lengths Lü Zhishu was willing to go to in order to betray her son. There was nothing really shocking about what had happened between He Yu and Xie Qingcheng. He sat there on his chair with his black leather gloves on, legs crossed, as he went through all of the images.

"Executive Duan, what do you think we should do…"

He viewed every last frame of that thrilling adventure in the car, before replying to the anxious woman on the other end of the call. "These are your personal family matters, Executive Lü. You can handle them as you see fit."

She thought she'd misheard. "Wh-what…?"

"I said, these are your family matters." He smiled. "You might be part of the organization, Executive Lü, but I'm not that callous. Your son's love life is truly not something that requires my input."

A dazed look spread across Lü Zhishu's face. She was very familiar with Duan Wen's snide comments, and right now he sounded like he was mocking her for only just having found out about the two of them, no matter how she thought about it.

"Executive Duan," she hastily replied, "d-don't be angry. This is something I had a hunch about way back… It's just that I wasn't sure…and didn't want to bother you about it. That's why I'm reporting in so late. Please don't take offense…"

Duan Wen burst out laughing. "Executive Lü."

"Y-yes, I'm here."

"You really don't need to make such a big deal of things. He Yu is the blood toxin, and this is indeed rare—but in the end, the blood toxin isn't absolutely inimitable. The obedience potion we've made works similarly. However, we would have an interest in the blood toxin if its capabilities continue to grow. That's why I told you that you can let him do as he likes. It won't be too late to draw him into our fold once he manages to truly grasp the ultimate powers of his blood. Before then, I wanted you to treat him kindly, begin reconciling with him so that he'd slowly turn toward you."

"I have been doing my best…"

"Then all we can say is that your best is far from enough. Do you remember when I called you after the Huang Zhilong incident?"

"Of course, and that's precisely why—"

He cut her off. “Executive Lü, I told you back then that with Huang Zhilong’s position now empty, I hoped that He Yu might replace him and become our youngest pillar of strength. He’s an ideal candidate. Young, clever, educated, and enhanced with certain abilities… I asked you to be better to him. I don’t want to take a man like him by force; I want him to come to us with absolute conviction. I want him to join our camp by the bonds of affection.”

Leaning back against his chair, Duan Wen chuckled. “But what have you done? Risked discovery to have him followed, just to learn about something like this?”

She paled. “Executive Duan, I’m certain he hasn’t found out. I’m very sure __”

“Of course I know he hasn’t found out. Do you think I’d still take your call otherwise?”

Lü Zhishu shuddered.

A sigh came through the phone. “Executive Lü, let me make things clearer. Did you think, with our organization’s abilities, we didn’t know about what you’ve just found out?”

“E-Executive Duan, did you…”

“I knew about the two of them a long time ago. Your son is madly in love with him; he wasn’t even trying to hide it. If this was the first I’d heard about all they’ve done, I’d have to just step down and retire. Clearly there’d be no use for me anymore.”

She fell silent.

“I reminded you again and again to treat the blood toxin well, in hopes that one day you could be the chip that tips its loyalties toward us. Instead of pushing him unhesitatingly toward the police, toward Xie Qingcheng.”

“If…if that’s the case, why don’t we just kill Xie Qingcheng…?”

“First, I want an elite blood toxin I can use at will, not a madman who goes insane at the slightest trigger.” The man’s tone was very light. He paused. “Second,” he said, “I told you all a long time ago that you could do whatever you wanted to Xie Qingcheng, but you may not kill him.”

“Does he have some kind of special ability? Or…”

She was coldly cut off. “That’s on a need-to-know basis. I don’t have to explain myself to you. However, if any of you risk his life…” The threat in his voice was audible through the phone. “Then you can follow him to the grave.”

She had been warned from the start that injuring Xie Qingcheng was forbidden unless she was truly left with no other choice. Even during the explosion at the broadcasting tower, when Duan Wen learned Xie Qingcheng had also gone into the basement, he’d thought of ways to keep him out of mortal peril. Only later, when he realized there truly wasn’t anything they could do, did he give this up.

Nearly everyone in the organization thought there was something off about how Duan Wen treated Xie Qingcheng. He usually didn’t pay attention to what Xie Qingcheng was doing—he didn’t care about him as a person, but he was very invested in him staying alive. He would never try to kill him. Lü Zhishu had at one point wondered if Duan Wen and Xie Qingcheng were somehow involved in secret,

but that didn't make any sense either. It didn't seem like he was holding back out of sentiment. If he really had no other choice, he would act, and he hadn't hesitated in the least to ruin Xie Qingcheng's reputation or slander his integrity. It seemed as if he didn't care what people did to him, as long as he didn't die because of it.

Lü Zhishu didn't dare ask him about this trigger. She hesitated, then anxiously said, "Executive Duan, don't worry. I will certainly act as you ordered; I would never risk his life. But…but…"

"But you don't know who He Yu will choose with Xie Qingcheng in the mix." Duan Wen finished her sentence for her, and she lapsed into an embarrassed silence. He scoffed. "This is what Executive Lü should be focusing on. I haven't asked you to accomplish much else in these past few years, except for this matter of utmost importance. I hope you will not disappoint me too thoroughly."

Not a word passed her lips.

"Executive Lü, it doesn't matter if you let He Yu continue on like this or force them to break up. As long as he ends up turning to you in the end, you can do whatever you'd like. The one red line you may not cross is killing Xie Qingcheng."

"Then, then if I hurt him—"

"Whatever you like. As long as he's still alive, I don't care."

After saying a few other things, he hung up. The person silently standing at his side finally spoke.

"Executive Duan," he said, "if I didn't know better, I'd think you had a crush on Xie Qingcheng." The man stopped kneading Duan Wen's shoulders, lowering his head and laughing. It was He Yu's new personal doctor, Anthony.

Duan Wen seemed apathetic. "You know I don't have any interest in him."

"But I do." The doctor narrowed his peach-blossom eyes, smirking. "I'm terribly curious about what Executive Lü sent over. I really didn't expect Xie Qingcheng to be the one on the bottom," he said, thoughtful. "Can you play that car video again?"

He reached to touch Duan Wen's laptop, but the man grabbed his hand halfway through the motion. Anthony's expression faltered.

Duan Wen looked up through his lashes. "Don't assume I don't know what you're plotting. During the flooded studio case, you're the one who incited the old lady into acting in my absence. You're the reason Xie Qingcheng and He Yu nearly died in there."

Anthony said nothing.

"I've noticed everything you were doing. Stop wasting your time thinking about irrelevant matters." Duan Wen slowly and coolly finished his instructions before letting go of Anthony's hand. "You can go. Don't make any more trouble for me, or else I'll deal with you just like the rest."

Meanwhile, after hanging up, Lü Zhishu lay back on the balcony chair trying to make sense of the whole mess. Based on what Duan Wen said, he didn't care about what Xie Qingcheng and He Yu were doing at all. He only cared about two things: He Yu joining the organization by his own choice, and Xie Qingcheng's continued existence. But how exactly could she make He Yu turn toward her?

It was far too late to pull the family card. Even if their relationship had warmed by a few degrees, they weren't exactly close. Now that he had Xie Qingcheng, He Yu didn't even care if his parents were there for his birthdays anymore. Lü Zhishu stared down at the rushing Huangpu River beneath her. Her heart felt like it was surging more violently than the water itself.

After thinking it over from all angles, there was one thing she knew for sure.

Her greatest priority should be to ensure that He Yu stopped feeling anything for Xie Qingcheng. She would only get the chance to bring his loyalties back to her if they fractured completely. But Duan Wen was right; she couldn't try to pry them apart. In this way, Lü Zhishu was actually much smarter than Xie Qingcheng. As a parent, he immediately tried to force Xie Xue to break up, but Lü Zhishu knew very well that this would only have the opposite effect if she tried the same with He Yu. And if He Yu found out that she'd had him followed, forget respecting her as a parent—he'd likely slam his hand down on the table and run away from home.

Her goal wasn't just naively hoping He Yu and Xie Qingcheng would separate. Romeo and Juliet were together in their hearts even when they were physically apart—trying to brute-force a pair of lovebirds would be the dumbest possible choice. Not only would she fail, but all of his resentment would fall on her. Only an idiot would try something like that.

Lü Zhishu swiftly destroyed the surveillance footage and sent the private investigator the rest of his fee—paying him a large commission he would certainly not refuse—to ensure no other mishaps could occur. She did all of this very efficiently because she knew she absolutely must not give He Yu any reason to suspect, nor the chance to discover, that she'd had him followed. The outcome truly did not bear imagining. She got rid of every last scrap of evidence that she was on his trail in order to keep her hacker son from finding out.

All that mattered was that she knew.

That was right. She had to slowly devise a perfect solution. It didn't matter how long it took; she'd only achieve her goal if she stayed in the darkness while He Yu naturally grew to hate Xie Qingcheng. That was the only way she would get her opportunity…

While Lü Zhishu thought that Xie Qingcheng was a shameless doctor who'd fucking seduced He Yu, the truth was that he really wished He Yu would stop trying to see him. Unfortunately, some things were out of his control.

That night, it rained again. Coughing, Xie Qingcheng went to the window and saw the silhouette of the man still stubbornly watching him, only to send him a 'goodnight' text at the end of the evening. He sighed and closed his eyes. The little devil hadn't brought an umbrella. If he didn't leave, he'd wind up soaked to the bone.

So Xie Qingcheng turned out the lights early and went to bed.

Before he fell asleep, He Yu's text popped up on his phone. *"Goodnight, Xie Qingcheng. Eat a good breakfast tomorrow. Don't let your blood sugar drop so low again."*

The sound of the drumming rain outside beat down on his heart.

The sound grew louder and louder as he stared at the words on his phone screen. He couldn't help but get up and look through the dim light at where He Yu was standing, getting ready to leave.

He watched him run out into the rain, and grabbed his phone to type out a text, distraught. "Come up and take an umbrella…"

His fingers froze over the send button.

He couldn't show mercy.

Ultimately, Xie Qingcheng deleted the words he'd written. When he looked up, he saw He Yu staring down at his phone, soaked through. He had seen the *"Xie Qingcheng is typing…"* message pop up. He stopped right in his tracks, and stood there for a very long time. Xie Qingcheng watched him from the darkness. In the end, He Yu realized he wouldn't text him anything after all, so he scrubbed his face —perhaps from the rain, or something else—and slowly walked away.

Xie Qingcheng didn't sleep a wink.

The next morning, he barely managed a small nap—only for his phone to ring. As he grabbed his phone, half awake, the words 'He Yu' almost spilled from his mouth. That subconscious urge instantly jolted him to full consciousness.

He stared at the caller ID, coming to his senses. "Chen Man?"

Chen Man invited him to a tea shop on the Huangpu River.

They hadn't talked in a while. Though Chen Man badly wanted to see him, Xie Qingcheng had been completely at his wits' end, and awfully sick to boot. He told Chen Man he shouldn't come for no good reason, and to focus on his own work. Always the type to do as Xie Qingcheng said, he really did stay away. This time, though, it was because Chen Man said he wanted to talk with him about his brother Chen Lisheng, so Xie Qingcheng agreed to meet him at the tea shop that evening.

The sight of Xie Qingcheng startled Chen Man badly. "Ge, why have you lost so much weight? I-is it because of Xie Xue?" He'd found out about that too, and at the time he'd called Xie Qingcheng to console him.

He shook his head. "I can't be bothered," he said simply. "I'm just too busy right now."

"B-but you still have to eat properly…" Chen Man was very worried now. He stared at Xie Qingcheng, looking him up and down, unable to comprehend how he could have become so gaunt in such a short time. "Have you gotten a checkup?"

"Yes, there's nothing wrong." Xie Qingcheng sat down and ordered a cup of white tea. He looked up, eyeing Chen Man. He was fully healed, and he looked sprightly as well.

Xie Qingcheng sighed inwardly. Out of these three little brats, Xie Xue, He Yu, and Chen Man, at least one of them wasn't stressing him out. "Let's talk business," said Xie Qingcheng. "What did you want to talk about, about your dage?"

Chen Man had no choice but to listen to him. "Xie-ge, do you remember that videotape we received? The tape from Zhao Xue—the one with my ge's handwriting on it?"

“I do. After Huang Zhilong’s death, I was the one who told Commissar Wang about it. After all, it has to do with the entire case, and it might even hold clues linked to the deaths of your dage and my parents. I hoped they could use the videotape to find a breakthrough for the investigation—what happened? Did they find something?”

“Mn. The writing on the videotape has been dated.” Chen Man sounded dejected. “It’s from over ten years ago. It’s not recent. They said my dage had probably only just gotten the videotape and didn’t have the time to bring it to the police office before he had his accident, and that’s how the evidence ended up with them. Now, some people think the person who sent the videotape is Jiang Liping… After all, it’s what confirmed our suspicions about Zhilong Entertainment’s basement. But I don’t think it was her.”

Xie Qingcheng knew what Chen Man really meant was that he hadn’t given up on Chen Lisheng. He poured him a cup of tea. “I don’t think it was Jiang Liping either.”

Chen Man’s eyes lit up. “Y-you agree with me?”

“Yes. We didn’t know Jiang Liping for very long, and we didn’t have the time to confirm other things with her, but if she really did send it she would have at least mentioned it when she saw you. She wouldn’t have reacted that way. Also…” Xie Qingcheng looked up at him. “I don’t think the person who sent it was an informer like her.”

Chen Man’s expression dulled.

He said he accepted it, that his gege was dead. But somewhere in the depths of his heart, he’d held onto his informer hypothesis and his spy hypothesis. Especially after he saw Jiang Liping, he’d become even more convinced his gege was an informer like her, only deeper undercover than she was. But Xie Qingcheng didn’t agree with his view of the situation.

“Chen Man, think about what came of you receiving the videotape,” he said. “Yes, we did immediately get a channel with which to continue the investigation, and we did confirm our target as the basement of Zhilong Entertainment. But what happened afterward? Because you wanted to know the truth so badly, you went alone to Huang Zhilong’s company and ended up captured and injected with drugs. You might’ve ended up as Huang Zhilong’s hostage while he made his escape.” He paused. “The person who sent the video didn’t think for one moment about the danger you’d be placed in. Does that sound like your brother at all?”

Chen Man fell silent. The light in his eyes blew out like extinguished candles. “…Dage wouldn’t,” he mumbled.

Chen Lisheng might not have been his full brother, but Chen Man’s mom hadn’t been an adulterer. His father was a widower who had remarried, so the two brothers were very close. When he was little, Chen Man had been a weak little boy who was constantly bullied. Every time, it was Chen Lisheng who came to his rescue, Chen Lisheng who fought back on his behalf.

One time, Chen Man was beaten badly. A group of hooligans said his mother was a whore who’d slept her way up; he fought them in a rage, only to lose one of his baby teeth and break his leg in the ensuing battle. He lay there in the mud, sobbing. It was Chen Lisheng who’d found him, picking up his little brother who’d wept himself breathless and carrying him on his back while holding an umbrella, all

the way to the hospital.

The whole time, Chen Man was crying. “My mom isn’t a whore! She isn’t!”

Chen Lisheng would console him softly. “Don’t listen to their nonsense. Mom isn’t.”

All those years, Chen Lisheng and Chen Man were as close as any two full-blooded brothers. While Chen Man’s leg was healing, Chen Lisheng piggybacked him to school and back every single day. When he was better, Chen Lisheng worried that his little brother would get bullied again, so he insisted on walking him to his classroom doors and picking him up once they were dismissed. They’d walk home together, hand in hand.

Even now, Chen Man could still feel his shadow whenever he took that road.

His eyes stung. He lowered his head, wiping at his tears. “I…I just thought… That videotape had a note for me to use our old video player, so I thought…”

Xie Qingcheng frowned slightly. “Chen Man, you’ve already been hurt once. Did you realize that as soon as you began to suspect it was your brother who sent the video, you sank into this assumption and couldn’t get out? You even made terribly dangerous decisions because of it. I don’t think that the sender cared much for your safety. If they didn’t care about you, then the sender could not possibly have been your dage Chen Lisheng. You need to stop entertaining that possibility.” He coughed. “Let the police investigate. The truth is very important, but no more than your own life.”

Chen Man fell silent.

His parents had been saying much the same things, but their words weren’t as useful as Xie Qingcheng’s. He thought that the only person who could really understand how he felt was Xie Qingcheng, because he had also so bitterly tried to find the truth behind his parents’ deaths—but for his family, for his sister, he had to stop.

Seeing that Chen Man was calming down, Xie Qingcheng sat with him in the private room and chatted for a while longer. Just like when they were younger and he’d comforted the boy who’d lost his brother, he consoled the man’s turbulent emotions. In the end, Chen Man could finally let go of the matter of Chen Lisheng and the videotape.

He brightened. “Ge, thank you so much… I feel much better—” Before he could finish with “now,” his phone rang.

It was his mom. “Xiao-Yan, where are you?”

“I’m having dinner with Xie-ge. Mn, tell me…”

As Chen Man hummed in agreement at what his mother was saying, he looked up at Xie Qingcheng and his demeanor suddenly turned awkward. “Mom,” he said quietly, “let’s talk about this another time… Let’s talk when I get back.”

After hanging up, Xie Qingcheng noticed the flush in his ears. “What happened?”

Chen Man didn’t want to talk about it. He was still mired in grief for his brother, but when he glanced at Xie Qingcheng, he realized he could tell him…and see his reaction for himself. Hesitating, he told him the truth.

“It’s my mom… She thinks I’ve not been in the best mood recently, and she’s worried that I keep obsessing over what happened to my ge, so she wants me to focus on something else…” Pausing, he looked into Xie Qingcheng’s face and mustered up his courage to say, “Xie-ge, my mom introduced me to a potential girlfriend.”

Chen Man watched his expression carefully. “Wh-what do you think?”

“Oh…” Xie Qingcheng startled. He hadn’t been expecting it, but he nodded. “That’s good news. What kind of girl is she?”

Chen Man lapsed into a long silence.

He knew that Xie Qingcheng was a straight man, and he knew straight men were like drugs: completely off-limits. But he couldn’t help but like him. At seeing how little he was affected by hearing about his matchmaking dates, Chen Man couldn’t hold himself back no matter how well-tempered he might be. He stared at Xie Qingcheng, the rims of his eyes reddening.

“Xie-ge, do you…do you really have nothing else you want to say?”

Xie Qingcheng didn’t understand. “No… Did you want me to check her out for you?”

It cost Chen Man a great deal to hide his own sadness and reckless impulse. He took a deep breath, forcing himself to turn away. “No,” he said after a long time. “Nothing. I’ll take you home.”

Chen Man had driven here, so he brought Xie Qingcheng back to the Huzhou Medicine dorms. He parked below, and the two of them got out.

Xie Qingcheng was rather confused. He thought Chen Man would just go home himself now that he’d dropped him off. “What’s wrong?” he asked. “Is something else the matter?”

Chen Man said nothing. He’d hardly said anything the whole way here. He felt worse and worse the more he thought about it, and honestly, after the basement incident, he badly wanted to find the opportunity to have a good talk with Xie Qingcheng. He didn’t want to keep hesitating. Some things were better confessed early, or else the other person could go their whole life and never know. One life was so short—why didn’t he have the courage to make an attempt?

This line of thought had been fermenting in his heart, and the matchmaking call had catalyzed an impulsive climax.

He wrung his hands, damp with sweat. “Xie-ge…”

“Are you in a bad mood?” asked Xie Qingcheng. He thought Chen Man was still upset about Chen Lisheng, so he considered it and cleared his throat. “How about I walk around the field with you?” He reached into his coat for a smoke, to have one for the walk.

Chen Man didn’t know where he got the courage—he just suddenly reached out and grabbed his hand, holding him by the wrist where his tattoo lay.

“No, Xie-ge.”

Xie Qingcheng blinked. He stared at the hand around his own, before looking at Chen Man’s face. “Then what’s wrong?” he asked in utter bafflement.

Chen Man held his hand, unmoving.

He didn't let go of him; the courage and the recklessness in his heart continued to build. He looked up, staring into Xie Qingcheng's eyes. He held him so tightly, as if afraid the man would ditch him and run away as soon as he spoke out loud.

"I…" He took a deep breath. "Xie-ge, actually, I…"

"Professor Xie." Chen Man had just gathered up the strength, but one of the security guards on patrol had come over and started speaking to them very courteously. "Um, it's probably best not to park here today. They're repainting the road lines tomorrow, so if you could, please park in the parking lot behind the building? Thank you!"

Chen Man stared. Interrupted midway, just like that?

Xie Qingcheng quickly acquiesced. "Then you can park first," he said. "Do you know the way?"

All Chen Man's courage had been mustered for nothing. "…Yes," he replied, slightly green.

"Go. I'll go make you a cup of tea upstairs. Let's not go to the field—if there's anything you want to talk about, come upstairs and let's chat."

He lowered his head. After a few beats, he hummed in agreement and got back in the car. Xie Qingcheng and the security guard nodded at each other and went their separate ways. At the hallway doors, the sensor light flickered on. But to his surprise, there was a familiar silhouette curled up by the door of his dorm…

"He Yu?"

Hearing his voice, the boy turned around. His eyes were bloodshot and glassy, while the sharp scent of alcohol wafted off of him. The monitor bracelet on his wrist flashed orange. In the gathering tension, Xie Qingcheng understood—god damn it, He Yu was drunk!

Chapter 166:
My Love Rival Knows Everything

IT HAD BEEN a long time since He Yu had gone so brazenly to Xie Qingcheng's door. Ever since Xie Qingcheng had explicitly refused him, he'd stopped daring to press him much at all. But with some alcohol in him, all of that flew out of his head.

He stared dumbly at Xie Qingcheng and staggered to his feet. He first called his name, very sadly and quietly. "Xie-ge…" He slowly walked toward him. "You're back…"

"He Yu, you—"

But He Yu had made it all the way up to him before he could even finish his sentence. He was pretty much delirious; he'd been suppressing everything inside him for so long, and now that he was drunk, it all came pouring out like molten rock. He stared at Xie Qingcheng's face in a daze, then reached out to grab his wrist. Pushing him up against the wall, he pressed his mouth to the nape of his neck.

In his wildest imagination, Xie Qingcheng never thought that things would come to this. He paled, grunting as he flinched back. Against the wall, his back was tight with tension, but he couldn't get away. It was as if He Yu was drinking his blood. "He Yu, you're drunk… Wake up! Let me go! Let me—"

But He Yu covered his mouth. Eyes hazy, he nuzzled Xie Qingcheng's cheek, the junction of his shoulder and neck, so devoutly and so sadly.

"It hurts, Ge. I don't know… I don't know what I did wrong," he rasped. "I don't know why you can't accept me, even after knowing me for so long…" Tear tracks covered his cheeks. He curled in on himself, burying his face against Xie Qingcheng's neck.

"Why…? Xie Qingcheng…I thought you liked it. I thought you might've maybe liked me back, just a little bit… When I held you, kissed you, when we were in bed, you'd started to reciprocate… I thought you were slowly accepting my feelings… Why…?" His face seemed to crumple. "Why'd you suddenly end things? Why would you…

"It hurts, Xie Qingcheng," he mumbled. "It hurts…in my heart…"

And, "Feel it…won't you? It aches… Feel it and see. You'll know… It really can't beat anymore… Please…touch it…"

And, "Please…please…could you hold me…? Could you hold me, please?"

With He Yu's hand clamped over his mouth, Xie Qingcheng was so mad that steam was liable to start coming out of his ears. He was also terribly uncomfortable, and worried that Chen Man would suddenly come back—so he thrashed all the harder. He forced his head to the side and out of He Yu's grasp.

"Why the hell were you drinking…? You really are a moron! Why the hell are you doing this to yourself?"

This only broke He Yu's heart further. The drunken boy gazed at him. "If you didn't want me to do this to myself…then look at me, Xie Qingcheng… Why did

you have to treat me like this?! It hurts so bad, Xie Qingcheng, and you won't even spare me a glance?!"

"I won't! I don't want to see you so far gone!"

He Yu stared into his face. Unable to bear it anymore, he mustered a flare of mad strength and shoved Xie Qingcheng up against the wall in that dim hallway, kissing him like crazy. The more Xie Qingcheng struggled, the harder He Yu held on. He kept one arm around Xie Qingcheng's waist and buried his other hand in his hair, as if trying to pour all the pain and sadness and unanswered yearning he'd kept bottled up into the kiss.

"But I missed you… I miss you so much I feel like I'm dying… Xie Qingcheng… I hoped that the alcohol could help me forget you…but I drank so much, and I only missed you more… I really wanted to ask—are you made of ice? Do you have a heart carved from stone…?" He Yu was mumbling through his tears, still kissing him so fervently and feverishly. He was hardly aware of what he was doing; he grabbed this man he wanted so badly, touching Xie Qingcheng's heated skin and holding him so tight it hurt him.

"Why won't you accept my feelings…no matter what I do…? Your gender became my original sin, right? It doesn't matter how much I love you…right…?"

Unable to properly reply, Xie Qingcheng thrashed desperately. "He Yu, you've gone crazy! Do you even know what you're doing? Don't—"

In the madness, he heard a roar of fury. He Yu was shoved off and away from him.

It was Chen Man. The moment Xie Qingcheng registered who he was, his ears began to ring. Chen Man. He'd seen everything…heard everything…

He had. He'd heard someone fighting as soon as he came upstairs, and saw Xie Qingcheng being pushed against the wall and forcibly kissed by a tall man. The lapels of Xie Qingcheng's shirt were a mess, and that young man had his arms around him, kissing him so desperately…

And the person desecrating Xie Qingcheng was the one who'd tried to convince Chen Man not to pursue him: He Yu!

Chen Man finally snapped out of his utter shock. An inferno of rage exploded inside his head, immediately driving him mad. He rushed toward He Yu, his senses a mess—all that echoed in his head were those words he'd just overheard.

"What the fuck are you doing? Let him the fuck go!" Chen Man, who'd hardly ever cursed, was flushed with anger. Veins stood out on his neck. His voice was hardly recognizable. "You animal!" he howled. "How…how…how dare you!"

He couldn't believe it. Every inch of him was shaking; astonishment and fury, jealousy and fear had become knives slamming down on the obedience and composure he'd always been so proud of. As the first jolt of rage that threatened to tear him apart faded, he threw himself at the man holding Xie Qingcheng down and shoved He Yu against the other wall, like two bulls locking horns.

As soon as He Yu recognized Chen Man through his snarling mask, he quieted. He slowly looked at Chen Man, then at Xie Qingcheng. So…so the two of them…had been together tonight, right? If he hadn't been here…Chen Man would've gone into Xie Qingcheng's room, right…?

He bit down on his bloodied lips and began to laugh. “Ha ha ha ha…ha ha ha!” In the misery of his smile, there was the relief of finally no longer needing to keep a secret—as well as a vindictive thrill. He didn’t know whom he was taking revenge on—Chen Man? Xie Qingcheng? Perhaps it was himself.

“That’s right… I do dare… Why would there be anything I’m afraid of?!” He Yu shrieked. “Why don’t I tell you everything, Chen Yan… Young Master Chen, Officer Chen! Listen up! The two of us, myself and your untouchable Xie-ge! We’ve done everything! I was his first man…and I still am! I’m the one who took him! I held him and kissed him! Your Xie-ge…he begged me in bed, I bullied him to tears, and the name he cried when he couldn’t take it anymore was mine! Mine alone! It’s not your place to try and stop me! Who the fuck even are you? Get the hell out!”

Chen Man was shaking all over.

He Yu was saying—he dared to say—he’d held Xie Qingcheng, kissed Xie Qingcheng, and that…that Xie Qingcheng had begged him…! Insane, it was too insane… But all those suspicions finally clicked into place. All those scenes flickered through Chen Man’s white-hot mess of a head. The strangeness between the two of them when they met in the hallway during filming. When he asked where Xie Qingcheng had gone between takes, and He Yu had replied to him so scornfully. At the doorway of the vegetarian restaurant, when He Yu had smoked a Marlboro as he gave him that lengthy spiel.

And…

When they were in the basement of Zhilong Entertainment, when He Yu brought him out and said through gritted teeth that Xie Qingcheng couldn’t possibly like him back—before turning around and going back into the fire, back to Xie Qingcheng’s side…

He understood.

He understood everything.

Chen Man blew his top. All those years of careful self-control disappeared; with a roar, he grappled He Yu. He kept punching him, again and again. He was still seeing him holding Xie Qingcheng, with one hand on his mouth and the other clamped around his tattooed wrist, shoving him up the wall and kissing his neck. He Yu said he and Xie Qingcheng had slept together…

That lofty man with arrogant features, dressed in an impeccable suit while a cigarette dangled from his hand—the man whose hand he didn’t even dare hold—had been shoved beneath this boy who was his junior and defiled! Those pale hands, one ringed by a tattoo—had He Yu grasped them on the pillows of some hotel? Had they trembled because of him? Curled helplessly because of He Yu?

Xie Qingcheng’s lips—all those times when Chen Man was in despair, they’d shaped comforting words, and Chen Man revered him too much to even stare. But He Yu had long since kissed, suckled at, and bitten them, feverishly… This throaty voice that only ever calmly explained things to him had rasped fragile pleas for He Yu to hear… The mature elder brother he yearned to match had become prey in the bed of another boy!

He yelled at him, voice hoarse. “He Yu, you’re a fucking animal—how could you treat him that way? How could you disgrace him like that?!”

He Yu shoved him aside, equally vicious. “What right do you have to scold me? Huh? Are you any cleaner than me? I don’t need to remind you of your own filthy heart!”

They were yelling so loudly. Any more of this and the neighbors would come out.

Xie Qingcheng slowly stood up, returning to his senses. This was far too humiliating; his vision was still flickering, and he hardly caught a word of what they said. He hadn’t realized what that last comment about Chen Man meant. He did his best to clear his head, fixing his clothes with shaking hands. Slowly, he pieced his composure back together.

“That’s *enough*.”

No one answered him.

“Fucking hell, stop this right now!”

But they both still kept yelling, so he gritted his teeth and went to yank them apart. In the deafening silence, he made the decision to turn, panting, toward Chen Man first. He had the courage to meet his gaze, but what He Yu had said was so humiliating, his peach-blossom eyes had a red sheen. “Chen Man!” he said. “Go home.”

“Ge…” Chen Man’s mouth was quivering. He looked at him. “Is what he said…is what he said true?”

No answer came.

He Yu wiped at the blood on his face, his eyes scarlet. He shoved in front of Xie Qingcheng and snarled, “Of course what’s between us is true. If you don’t believe it, I—”

Crack.

Xie Qingcheng whirled around and backhanded He Yu right in the face. “Enough! Shut up!”

He Yu took the slap. The hit knocked his head to the side, and his hair was a mess as it lay before his ink-dark eyes. There was absolute silence.

Breathing in, Xie Qingcheng turned back to Chen Man. “Go home.”

“But…”

This man who’d always taken a lofty position, this man who’d always focused on how he presented himself to his juniors, who almost never had anything gentle to say to the kids around him, was still holding onto his dignity. But his eyes were glimmering with broken light.

Xie Qingcheng gasped for breath. “Chen Man, take it as doing me a favor. I don’t want to be so pathetic. I don’t want this to become such a mess that the whole dorm building comes out to watch the show.”

Chen Man said nothing.

“Take it as doing me a favor,” Xie Qingcheng said again.

His heart was straining tight. Even his breathing had become labored. Xie Qingcheng didn’t say the word “please,” but Chen Man could sense the depths of his despair. His mouth moved. He wanted to say something, but he couldn’t shape the words. He heard movement coming from upstairs—some teacher had heard the

commotion and was getting ready to come down.

Chen Man was trembling.

He knew he should leave. He'd always been obedient; he was instinctively against bringing Xie Qingcheng any trouble. But for some reason…in this moment…a different soul was coming to life inside him. That soul was in so much pain, in so much denial…it wanted to explode. It made it hard for him to do what was asked of him. This conflict raged inside him, making him shake harder and harder.

He stared at Xie Qingcheng. "What about him?" He Yu. "Xie-ge." His voice was rough and hesitant. "What about him?"

"He has to stay. There's a talk I must have with him." He cut Chen Man off before he could start again. "I understand what you're worried about. It'll be fine—there are plenty of other people in the building."

Chen Man's eyes reddened completely. His fingers tightened silently into fists.

Xie Qingcheng was choosing to keep He Yu with him. This seemed to bring some lucidity back to He Yu's head, but he was still incredibly dangerous. In this state, he wasn't fit to be with anyone. Xie Qingcheng knew this; he had to swiftly end the stalemate they were stuck in. So he didn't make any other explanations. His dignity had been left in tatters—he didn't have the face to say anything else to Chen Man.

He went to the door and unlocked his dorm. He didn't look back, and there was no emotion in his voice. "He Yu. Come here."

There was still blood on He Yu's face from his fight with Chen Man. It was like a rip in his mask of elegance, a glimpse into the bloodthirsty ferocity beneath. He flung Chen Man's hands away and went to Xie Qingcheng, the monitor on his wrist flashing threatening shades of red and orange.

Chen Man reached out. "Xie-ge…!"

The line of Xie Qingcheng's shoulders shook. He Yu walked into the entryway, and he followed. In that moment, as he stepped forward, he turned and looked at Chen Man. Even now, Xie Qingcheng didn't realize that Chen Man liked him. To him, his fury read as the reaction of a junior to the destruction of their senior's image. To him, Chen Man was his junior, and it was already humiliating enough for his junior to have seen him like this. He didn't want to drag Chen Man any deeper into this whirlpool of shame.

Chen Man was innocent; he shouldn't be involved.

"Go home."

Perhaps the shattered aura coming from Xie Qingcheng was so strong it managed to stop Chen Man in his tracks, reawakening the soul that revered and obeyed him while the evil one was forcibly constrained. He stared at him, tears streaking a line down his dazed face.

"Xie-ge…"

"I shouldn't have let you see such a sight," said Xie Qingcheng. "I'm sorry, Chen Man."

Chen Man wanted to say something else, but Xie Qingcheng had closed the door—gathering up the last of his self-respect before his junior.

Xie Qingcheng walked into the room and stared at He Yu, who stood there in silence. There was an expression on his face that veered between heartbreak and madness.

Saying nothing, he went up and grabbed He Yu by the wrist. He Yu shook as he looked up at him. But Xie Qingcheng only adjusted some of the dials on his bracelet, setting the comforting waves coming from the monitor to their highest point. He Yu could sense warmth going up his wrist and slowly enveloping his whole body.

"…The highest setting requires manual adjustment." Xie Qingcheng's voice was slow and rich, and devoid of all emotion. "It doesn't turn on by itself because of the intensity of the radiation. It's best not to use it for too long, but you need it right now."

He Yu thought Xie Qingcheng would beat him or scold him after he closed the door, but he hadn't expected him to look so exhausted once it was locked. He even seemed…despairing.

He was constantly emptying himself out to finish things, to make arrangements for his juniors' lives. He could wear away at what little energy he had left, but he had no choice but to overextend himself, emotionally and mentally, to deal with these unexpected mishaps. Xie Xue, Chen Man, He Yu… All these sudden incidents piled up one after another, hollowing him out entirely.

Xie Qingcheng watched as the bracelet on his wrist slowly stopped flickering red after the adjustment, finally letting go of his hand and walking toward his bedroom.

But He Yu grabbed him by the wrist. "Xie Qingcheng."

That despair had jabbed at He Yu, waking him up from his stupor, if very slightly. He wanted to say sorry, he wanted to ask him something, but his heart had been reduced to tatters. All those words faded by the time they made it to his chest. He opened his mouth, again and again, but all he managed to rasp was Xie Qingcheng's name. He couldn't put together a single sentence beyond that.

He was too drunk to speak, but tears beaded on his lashes and landed on the back of Xie Qingcheng's hand. It was so similar to the day he confessed, when he grabbed that hand and refused to let him go. Sobbing, he'd dug out his heart and handed it whole to the other man, begging for him to take a look.

But Xie Qingcheng didn't want him anymore.

All this time, he'd been doing his best to adjust. He thought he could deal with it, but none of that mattered in the end—he couldn't leave him at all. It was Xie Qingcheng who gave him the oxygen to continue living. He didn't know what he could say. In the end, he madly and stubbornly clung to him. All those thoughts became tears that fell onto Xie Qingcheng's shoulders. He Yu's expression was crazed and heartbroken, eyes glassy and lost.

Xie Qingcheng didn't fight back. He really was exhausted.

"He Yu," he rasped. "Do you know what you just did?"

No answer came.

“I don’t want to get angry with you anymore. Let go of me, and I’ll go make you a cup of sobering tea. We’ll sit down for a good talk.” He didn’t say it outright, but every word out of his mouth was thoroughly suffused with his disappointment.

The tea was ready. Hot, steaming, ginger tea. The two of them sat down across the coffee table, looking at each other in silence.

He Yu noticed that he was using single-use paper cups again and stared for a long beat. Another tear fell from his cheek. “Where’s the cup?” he asked.

“What?”

“Where’s my cup?” Wetness shone on his lashes. “Where did my mug go? The Nick and Judy mugs,” he said very quietly. “Can we use those?”

Xie Qingcheng was silent for a beat. “I tidied things up.”

He Yu fell silent too.

“I’ve tossed those mugs away,” Xie Qingcheng elaborated.

A look of pure misery appeared on He Yu’s face. Agony and madness shone in his eyes; he couldn’t sit at ease at all.

Xie Qingcheng pushed him his cup of ginger tea. “Drink.”

He Yu picked up the cup, but didn’t take a single sip.

There was no way he could relax… He knew drinking it would make him better, clear his head. But sometimes, what someone needed wasn’t to clear his head—being lucid would make him feel worse. He already felt so awful—every day they spent apart hurt him so badly. No painkiller could do anything about it… He couldn’t relax!

“He Yu, I know you really do love me. I don’t want to hurt you.” Xie Qingcheng finally spoke up. “So after I explained everything to you, I still allowed you to stick around. I never asked you to disappear forever.”

He Yu trembled. He felt a vein throbbing in the back of his neck; he felt like Xie Qingcheng really was going to drive him over the edge. “Then what about now?” he asked. “Do you want me to stay away from you forever now?”

Xie Qingcheng watched him quietly. After a long beat, he asked a question. “Do you remember what you said when you confessed to me?”

Silence.

“You said, if there came a day where you became a bother, I could tell you to stop at any point. He Yu, will you stand by your word this time?”

Chapter 167:
Don’t Cry

WILL YOU STAND by your word this time?

He Yu’s ears were ringing. His eyes blurred. It was like he suddenly couldn’t see Xie Qingcheng’s face anymore. Like the twenty-something Doctor Xie was sitting in front of him again, telling him, *I’m leaving*. He Yu resembled a shattered building. He’d fallen apart; he clutched at his face, tears streaming helplessly from his cheeks like beads from a broken string.

He didn’t answer Xie Qingcheng’s question. He only asked him, in abject wretchedness, “Why do you have to be like this…? Xie Qingcheng, why do you keep coming to my side, then keep discarding me…?” It was like every word was torn from his throat, shaking and covered in steaming blood. “Why…why…why are you trying to throw me away…?!”

Xie Qingcheng fumbled out a box of smokes. He wanted to light one, but he only put the box aside. “I don’t want to throw you away. If you were my patient, my junior, or even my friend, I would stay by your side. But…”

But He Yu was too far gone.

Xie Qingcheng thought he could make He Yu slowly lose interest, but found that his love grew beyond imagining—as self-destructive as a moth to flame, so fervent that he might only rest if he burned his life out. If He Yu continued like this, Xie Qingcheng really couldn’t imagine what he would do if he was gone one day. He closed his eyes.

“But what you want, I cannot give. He Yu, I don’t want to tell you we can continue like this, that things will naturally fix themselves with time—it’s just like slamming my head against a wall despite knowing it’s right there. Don’t you realize you’re only twenty? Your early twenties is some of the best time of your life. You can have all sorts of dreams and reach limitless potential; you can meet all sorts of people, even change the rest of your life.”

Xie Qingcheng spoke softly. “When I was twenty, I had no such choices. Those should’ve been the most carefree days of my life, but things weighed on me so heavily it was like I was eighty. I don’t want you to get to my age and look back to realize all that time was spent on a road with nothing at the end of it.”

He Yu said nothing.

“How long are you going to keep dragging things out with me? Knowing it’s impossible, yet refusing to let go.”

“Why is it impossible?” rasped He Yu. “If even Xie Xue and Wei Dongheng can be possible, why can’t we?”

“That’s not the same thing at all.”

“Why? Loving someone, caring for someone, wanting to spend a lifetime with them—isn’t that the same thing? Between us and them, us and any other pair in the world—what difference is there?!”

“I don’t love you.” Xie Qingcheng looked up. “I don’t like you. Is that enough?”

He Yu went mute.

“I’m a straight man, through and through. I will never love you. This is the difference, He Yu; is that enough for you?”

He Yu tried to say something; gaping like a fish out of water, he couldn’t even breathe. “Xie Qingcheng…you say you’re a straight man, through and through, but let me ask you… When we were together, did you ever—even if for a moment—feel swayed? Feel willing?”

Xie Qingcheng stared at him in silence. He lowered his lashes like closing a curtain. “…No. I’ve never been swayed.”

He Yu jolted to his feet. The rims of his eyes were red. He stepped across the coffee table and over to him, staring him down. His expression slowly went slack; even though the monitor bracelet kept him calm, his emotions were beginning to spiral out of control.

He shoved Xie Qingcheng back against the sofa, stubbornly and miserably, madly and desperately asking him, “Is that so? You’ve never been swayed, at all? Let me ask you—that day in the basement, on the verge of death, who did you kiss? That night on my birthday, who was the one who spent all day and night with me and told me happy birthday? Who’s the one who took me out for hot pot and made me a bowl of longevity noodles? Xie Qingcheng, let me ask you, who was it?! If you didn’t like me, if you were never swayed, why would you treat me like this? Tell me! *Tell me!*”

Staring at the boy in front of him, Xie Qingcheng sealed his heart entirely and hid it deep in his deteriorating body. His thin lips parted. “That wasn’t because I love you. I didn’t do any of that because I love you.”

“Then why?” He Yu’s voice was shaking. “Tell me, you kissed me, held me, cared for my feelings—what was that for?”

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes. “…Sympathy. That’s all.”

Even the light in He Yu’s eyes was shaking. His expression began to twist; the look on his face was one of absolute heartbreak, or complete and utter absurdity. The mess of his emotions made him look extraordinarily broken.

“…Sympathy,” he repeated, tasting the words in his mouth. “Sympathy. Sympathy indeed, Xie Qingcheng. Sympathy!”

The monitor on his wrist flared red, just like his eyes.

Before Xie Qingcheng could react, He Yu slammed him against the sofa and pushed him down, shoving himself all the way on top of him. He clamped his hands around Xie Qingcheng’s wrists, eyes teary but still vicious. “So—all of this was also sympathy?!” He started to kiss him, his hands beginning to fumble at Xie Qingcheng’s clothes.

Xie Qingcheng’s face paled, his thoughts flitting to the scars left from a recent treatment. He started desperately fighting back. “Let go… He Yu, don’t touch me! Let go!”

That blood-tinged kiss continued. By this point, He Yu wasn’t just drunk anymore. The monitor on his wrist blazed red. Xie Qingcheng had reduced his

carefully composed state of mind to absolute ruins.

His eyes were crazed. He forced Xie Qingcheng to turn and accept his kiss, while the other hand tugged coarsely at his pristine white shirt, as if trying to pull the cloth right off him. He'd been set off even worse this time, moving even more brutally than earlier in the hallway. The drinking had made his body so hot—now that he was exerting himself, his strength and the temperature of his skin were both terrifying.

"Was the way you acted in front of me on those nights also sympathy?" he snarled as he kissed him. "You did so much for me, you sat in my lap and ordered me to hold you tight, you wrapped your arms around me and kissed me, you wouldn't stop going crazy… You did all of that with me…again and again… You wouldn't stop… Was that all because of sympathy, Xie Qingcheng?"

Xie Qingcheng's clothes were a mess, and several of his buttons had fallen off. But he really wouldn't dare let He Yu see the scars on his body: the scars left from the straps he had no choice but to use to keep himself from going berserk during his treatments.

"No… Let go, He Yu… Let go of me!"

He dug his fingers into his loosening lapels, just barely hiding the skin mottled with scars. In the past, he'd been so strong, so powerful—strong enough to match He Yu in a fight—but now his body was falling apart. He was a mess of deteriorating organs, puppeting a body he could hardly summon strength into. He used to be able to pick up the young He Yu as he walked. But now, when faced with this massive dragon with its wings spread, he couldn't do a thing.

Except for his eyes.

Those eyes that had always been so clear and sharp hadn't changed at all. They stared at him, refusing to give up, gouging deep into He Yu's heart. He Yu grabbed him by the jaw, trying to kiss Xie Qingcheng's already bloodied lips—but when he met his eyes, he froze. He saw the glimmer in those habitually cold and composed peach-blossom eyes.

The inability to explain while He Yu was interrogating him, the utter humiliation of Chen Man discovering the truth about them, the weakness and pain of his body, and the terror of He Yu discovering the marks on it… He was human, after all. When the weight of all that emotion came crashing down on him, the fact he hadn't broken down was already proof of his indomitable soul—how could one possibly expect complete disaffection?

Xie Qingcheng himself hadn't registered the wetness in his eyes. It was a bodily reaction to being driven to his very limits, but he himself was numb to it all. He closed his eyes, only feeling something damp sliding away from the edges. As that tear fell from his face, though, He Yu's heart shuddered.

The light on the monitor bracelet dimmed. He stood up, realizing what he'd been doing; he instantly let go of Xie Qingcheng and stared in distress at the man below him. Xie Qingcheng had endured too much. His protective mechanisms weren't like He Yu's. He Yu would unconsciously give vent to his emotions, but Xie Qingcheng would simply endure them.

In the end, he truly couldn't fit anything more in his body. Suffering finally came spilling out of his eyes. He seemed so broken, lying there with his clothes a mess on the couch, his pale fingers still clutching his lapels together. His dark hair

was loose in front of his face, and beneath those long lashes, his glassy eyes were wide and unseeing. That tear slid onto his temples, leaving no trace behind.

He was too strong, too patriarchal. Thinking he could hang on, he couldn't feel his own tear at all, and it sank into his hair just like that.

He Yu woke up completely. "Xie-ge…" he said, voice shaking. "I…"

Xie Qingcheng slowly closed his eyes.

He Yu didn't dare to force him anymore. He reached out, hand trembling, to try and fix his clothes. But Xie Qingcheng's fingers wouldn't let go. His body was shaking softly, as if he no longer trusted He Yu at all. He Yu tried to help him button it up, but he realized that he'd torn the buttons from Xie Qingcheng's clothes. He couldn't…

Head lowered and shoulders shaking, he took Xie Qingcheng tightly into his arms. "Don't be scared, Xie Qingcheng. Don't be scared. I-I'll never hurt you again… I wouldn't. Don't cry…"

He Yu's own face was wet with tears, but he still reached up to wipe the tracks from Xie Qingcheng's face. He clutched him as if he was holding a cherished treasure on the verge of shattering. "Xie-ge, I'm sorry," he sobbed. "Please… It's all my fault… Don't cry…"

Chapter 168:
Don’t Throw Me Away

XIE QINGCHENG was numb for a very long time before he finally realized he was crying.

It was a very unfamiliar feeling. Slowly, he wondered—he could still cry, right? His heart had finally been filled to the brim; the emotions it couldn’t digest anymore came spilling out in the form of the tears he didn’t want to shed. It was so cowardly, he thought. How utterly pathetic.

He was thirty-three. How could a man of his age be reduced to this? He didn’t like seeing any signs of weakness in himself; he always wanted to be a strong, older authority figure that other people could rely on unconditionally. But in the span of one night—just one night—it was all ruined. In that moment, he suddenly felt very, very tired. It was like he’d been walking a very long road, one he’d insisted on taking for a long time. He wanted to use his limited time to clean up all the thorns on the path, to make sure that the people he wanted to protect could walk it unfettered once he was gone.

He wanted to teach them how to carry on on their own, the way a reliable older brother should. But in the eyes of his juniors, he’d become a seductive homosexual who’d shamelessly entwined himself with a young boy.

Lying in He Yu’s arms, Xie Qingcheng didn’t try to push him away. He was so unnervingly calm that He Yu didn’t even dare to keep throwing his fit. In the end, he spoke numbly, with the tears still on his face.

“Let go, He Yu. I know you like me. I thought I could control your emotions, but I overestimated myself. I failed to pull you up—instead, I fell alongside you. I should’ve left you the day I learned about your feelings. I thought I could help you slowly give up, but I only made you sink deeper in, and gave you hope in vain.”

And even threw myself in after you.

“I was far too arrogant. I kept making the wrong choice, and kept hurting you. It’s my own fault I ended up like this.”

He Yu shook his head, crying too hard to speak.

Xie Qingcheng turned and lowered his gaze to his face, but his eyes were still so blank. “Since we got together, it seems like your sadness always outweighed your joy. You hardly ever cried in the past, but now you’re always crying in front of me.”

He Yu scrubbed his face. “No, Xie-ge. I… Every day I’ve spent with you,” he rasped, “I’ve been really happy. I…”

“Then are you still happy now?”

Silence.

“This day was always coming, He Yu.” Xie Qingcheng’s voice was like still water, unmarred by any ripple. “Think things through. I’m a divorced man thirteen years your senior; I’ve never been gay. I’m…”

He paused, gritting his teeth and forcing the words he himself found humiliating out of his mouth. “It’s only because you drugged me—it’s only because I lost my senses. That’s how I ended up sleeping with you. That’s how I was reduced to this. Do you remember?”

It hit He Yu like a slap in the face. He couldn’t say a word.

“Do you think I could accept you?” Xie Qingcheng spoke so numbly, so coldly—but so brokenly. He dug out every scrap of his bloodied, shattered heart for He Yu to see. “You know this as well as I do. After that night, I kept having nightmares—every morning when I woke up, I felt disgusted. I’m a man… He Yu, I’m a fucking man! I didn’t call the police on you because I couldn’t stoop to talk about it, but I’m not a homosexual.”

He Yu’s eyes were crimson, but the rims were wet with tears. “Then do you think I am? Do you think I’m a homosexual, Xie-ge?” He held him, asking this question again and again. “Do you think I am…”

His voice was so pitiful, so pathetic.

Xie Qingcheng didn’t want to hear it anymore. He’d never wanted to settle the debt of what happened at Skynight. He always kept it covered up so pridefully, kept He Yu from seeing the blood and scars. But now he had to push him away for good. Even though so much had happened, he’d long since dropped his grudge over the mistake that came from He Yu’s glass of wine, but he had no choice but to show him that wound to force him away.

“You…? Yes, you are.” Xie Qingcheng slowly propped himself up. He sat up and pushed He Yu away with one shaking hand. He fixed his clothes with bloodred eyes, as if trying to fix his own destroyed composure.

He took a deep breath and summoned up his coldest, most final voice. “I don’t know if you were before, but you are a homosexual now. I am not. I thought we were both men, and that even if two men sleep together, there’d be no emotions involved… You ask me why I slept with you? Then let me tell you—later on, I was being self-destructive. I was trying to numb myself, when I made that mistake with you again. I was out of my damn mind. I wasn’t in love with you. Do you understand me now?”

The words he’d never said, had chosen to never say, all spilled out of his mouth. It was like aiming a kick unerringly at the young man’s chest. By the time he finished, his own eyes had reddened with the exertion. He rose, chest heaving, and stared down at the frozen boy. He’d realized—if he kept giving him those platitudes, kept saying those blunted words or put the blame on himself, He Yu would never give up.

His last words came out as a rasp. “Now, I’ve decided to end it. To turn over a new page. Do you know what that means? Do you need me to teach you?”

He Yu’s voice shook. “Ge…”

Xie Qingcheng said nothing.

“I can’t turn over… I really do love you… I know we have all sorts of bad memories…but can’t you at least tell me…tell me how we can start over…? If there’s anything I can do…”

Xie Qingcheng’s expression was ruthless, but tears still glimmered in his eyes. He looked at He Yu for a beat, very intently. “No. Nothing can be done, He

Yu. I don't need you to make amends, and I don't need any more apologies. I didn't bring up what happened at the club for any other reason—it was just to remind you that there's no way I could fall in love with a man. If you really feel guilt over what you did, there's only one thing I ask of you: From now on, I ask you to focus on yourself. Stop hurting yourself, or others, and do your best to live properly. Live on and be a good man. Then, I ask you…to stay as far from me as possible." He paused. "This is the kindest thing you can do for me."

He Yu said nothing.

"Take some time to calm down."

"Ge…"

"I'm leaving."

He couldn't stay in this dorm anymore. It wore on him too much—he had to go back to somewhere he could call "home" to retreat and lick his wounds. Even though he'd long since lost his parents, and his sister had left home—there was still a very small room in Moyu Alley. The last place he could keep himself safe, to curl up and comfort himself.

He pushed open the door to leave.

"Xie-ge… Xie-ge!"

As if waking from a dream, He Yu stumbled after him, trying to grab his fingers.

But Xie Qingcheng turned back at him. "Are you really going to keep coercing me, and yourself as well? I said this day would come, He Yu. You should let go."

Under the moonlight, he stood on one side of the hallway while He Yu stood on the other. A pale glow shone through the windows. Xie Qingcheng stared at He Yu. His vision blurred; even in the moonlight he couldn't see his face very clearly. He turned and left.

The expression he wore was so tired, so weary—like barbed chains that dug into He Yu's flesh, binding him up entirely. This time, he didn't run after him. But when he made it to the staircase, He Yu called out, "Xie Qingcheng."

His voice sounded almost bloody, worn and near tears. It sounded like the grieving wail of a lost wolf, returning to its senses after going insane. Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes. He didn't turn. When he walked down the steps, He Yu cried his name again. "Xie Qingcheng!"

His voice was louder than the last attempt, more pitiful. He wanted him to turn around, even just pause, for the slightest bit. But Xie Qingcheng seemed colder than ice, his heart harder than steel. He didn't even grant He Yu the slightest hesitation as he disappeared around the corner. From the empty hallway came the faint sound of one last cry.

"Xie Qingcheng…"

It might've been the distance, but he sounded eerily calm this time. Like someone who'd given all they had in the struggle but was still doomed to execution; all his drive had left him, and he'd become a ghost, filled with hatred and devastation as he rose from his corpse. Xie Qingcheng sealed his heart away, like a soulless puppet. Without turning back once, he walked out of that long and empty hallway.

He left and did not come back.

He Yu lowered his head and curled in on himself, as if clubbed all over. He tried to control his sobbing as he wrapped his arms around himself, collapsing down onto the dirty steps… His heart ached again. It hurt so badly. He'd never felt anything like this before. He looked up, staring in the direction Xie Qingcheng had left in. Even his pupils seemed red.

"Xie Qingcheng…"

He clutched at himself, shaking, mumbling dully…

It hurt too much. His monitor bracelet was blazing red. He had to take his medicine… He had to go take his medicine… He wouldn't let Xie Qingcheng think lowly of him… Where was his medicine…? Where was it?!

He charged into Xie Qingcheng's dorm, wailing all the while. He was trying to control himself, while being slowly driven insane by the intensity of his emotions. He went to pour himself some water… He took the pills he'd been keeping on him all day… And then He Yu broke down.

He hadn't even realized—behind the pillar, someone had been standing there this whole time, their expression even more numb and agonized than his.

It was Chen Man. Chen Man hadn't gone anywhere.

He'd been worried about Xie Qingcheng, so he never actually left. He only hid behind the pillar outside his dorm, so he saw the mad struggle between the two of them, and he heard every word Xie Qingcheng and He Yu had said. Chen Man stood there, his extremities freezing cold—as if his soul had been sucked out of his body. He looked down at his own trembling hands…

He'd met Xie Qingcheng first.

But because of his naivete, his gentleness, his willingness to endure… He'd missed it! He'd missed his chance! He looked up, dissatisfaction and pain scorching his heart—and his eyes were red as blood.

Chapter 169:
Don’t Ignore Me

WHEN XIE QINGCHENG returned to Moyu Alley, Auntie Li had just come out of her house. She’d been drying a basket of orange peels in the courtyard to have with hot water in the evenings.

When she saw Xie Qingcheng appear so despondently, she jolted in fear. “Xiao-Xie? What’s wrong?”

Xie Qingcheng’s head was all a mess, but he instinctively wanted to keep her from seeing him in a state like this. But Li Miaoqing had already come up and started looking him over, anxious and worried. She was terrified. Her Xiao-Xie’s clothes were all wrinkled, and a couple of the buttons were missing at his collar. They weren’t fit to be fastened at all anymore. There were some blindingly bright kiss marks on his neck, and a corner of his mouth had been bitten bloody.

What scared her worse were Xie Qingcheng’s eyes. His eyes had always been calm and sharp. Now, they were like a broken camera lens, completely unfocused. The rims of his peach-blossom eyes were even slightly damp and red, as if he’d been crying. She shuddered. She’d spent time in brothels when she was younger, so of course she knew what all this meant.

“Xiao-Xie,” she stammered. “You’re… You…”

“Auntie Li,” said Xie Qingcheng, “I’m fine. I just tripped on the road… Get some rest. I want to go home.”

The worst thing about the youth was how they thought they could trick fifty-something seniors. Auntie Li’s eyes widened. Her face paled. “But you’re…”

She wanted to ask him about it, but when those tottering words came to the tip of her tongue, they stopped. She knew how strong-willed Xie Qingcheng was, and how much importance he placed on his role as the masculine authority figure. She dared not ask him, but neither could she bear to let it go. They stood together like this in the courtyard; Li Miaoqing couldn’t hold back from wrapping her arms around him.

Many years ago, she’d had a boyfriend. After he learned that she’d been a sex worker, he refused to see her again and, despite knowing she’d quit the trade, also used her brutally. Afterward, he’d cursed her out for being a filthy whore. At the time, she’d come into the police station as a shell-shocked mess, and that was how she met Zhou Muying. Zhou Muying hadn’t said anything at first, back then. She only looked at her, and reached out to give her a hug.

Now, Li Miaoqing was hugging Xie Qingcheng. She didn’t know what had happened to him, but she remembered how comforting such a wordless embrace could be. She patted his back all the while, her voice thick with tears. “Don’t worry, Xiao-Xie. You’re safe now. You’re safe…”

“I want to go home…” His voice was hoarse. “Auntie Li, I want to go home…”

Li Miaoqing wiped away her tears. She didn't know what to say to comfort him, so she let go and watched in concern as he shuffled into his place.

That night, she sat in her own room, listening to the goings-on next door. Carefully, she thought about everything that had happened—she wasn't a baby. Xie Qingcheng's buttons, the marks on his neck and the blood on his mouth… It couldn't possibly have been a woman's doing. She thought about it for a long time, and someone's image slowly appeared in her head.

That young man, the one who'd refused to go home at Lunar New Year and stayed stuck to Xie Qingcheng's side. He'd seemed so sweet and well-mannered at the dinner table, and all the neighbors were enthusiastically trying to find him a girlfriend, but he'd smiled and turned them all down—sneaking glances at Xie Qingcheng all the while. Later on, when Li Ruoqiu had come back, the young man didn't keep eating—he'd followed them to Xie Qingcheng's doorstep, waiting there as if terrified something would happen inside.

He'd slept over at Xie Qingcheng's place that night.

She suddenly realized—the arguing voices, the smashing of objects… It wasn't their terrible movie excuse. That night, she'd faintly overhead the creaking of bedsprings and the slamming of furniture against the walls. She hadn't thought much of it at the time—she even blew it off as a dream. Now, she realized she hadn't been mistaken at all. The next day, she saw Xie Qingcheng and that young man entwined at the doorstep. When she came closer, the young man had suddenly taken off his scarf and wrapped it around Xie Qingcheng's neck, as if to hide something…

Realization dawned upon her. The teacup in her hand fell from her nerveless fingers and smashed to pieces on the ground. No wonder Xie Qingcheng hadn't even bothered to go on the matchmaking dates she tried to set up. No wonder he kept putting them off. He and that boy—

Nonsense… Utter nonsense…

No crying ever came from the room next door. Xie Qingcheng was a terribly strong man, who wouldn't cry for anything short of life or death. But Li Miaoqing couldn't take it anymore. She clasped her hands over her mouth and began to sob, against her will, the tears spilling from her eyes. How could Xiao-Xie be so silly? That was a rich young master not even twenty—you could tell he was a playboy at first glance. How could he truly be sincere to anyone? How could he possibly take care of anyone at all? He was…he must've been out of his mind! To get all entangled with a boy like that!

Li Miaoqing closed her eyes, tears falling from her chin.

On the other side of the wall, Xie Qingcheng lay with his clothes on in bed. He'd never even started anything with He Yu, so this couldn't be described as a breakup. Who knew that a separation that wasn't even a breakup could hurt worse than a legitimate parting between lovers, or spouses?

He numbly suppressed his emotions and reached out to turn on his bedside lamp. It was one that mimicked the play of light underwater, and projected the faint outlines of jellyfish. In its gentle glow, Xie Qingcheng lay there all night. Beside him was his phone screen, lighting up all the while with numbers from He Yu's monitor bracelet. He knew he himself was a wreck, but he kept on looking at He Yu's numbers, in case his mind veered toward an absolute breakdown.

Thankfully, it didn't.

The bracelet stayed red for a while, but still eventually settled. Xie Qingcheng knew he must have taken his medicine, but this time, he couldn't help him… This was something He Yu had to get over by himself, and Xie Qingcheng could only watch him from afar. A night spent lonely on the ocean floor, accompanied by the flashing red and orange monitor.

He lay brokenly on the bed, his eyes open. He thought about many things, or perhaps nothing at all—all the way until daybreak.

Li Miaoqing got up very early and pressed an ice pack to her red and swollen eyes.

She had made up her mind. She wouldn't ask Xie Qingcheng any questions; she'd never pour salt on someone's wound like that. Now, her duty was to take care of him. He never liked telling people about what weighed on his heart. Every time anything happened, he simply closed the doors and worked through it on his own. Perhaps he'd tried to digest too much bitter suffering, though—he didn't actually have much of an appetite.

When he wasn't feeling like eating, the only things that could tempt him were Li Miaoqing's chicken soup wontons, or the simple, homestyle dish of rice and bok choy in broth. So, with her basket in tow, she rushed to be the first to the farmer's market. She bought wonton wrappers, meat filling, and the freshest bunches of bok choy.

But when she was turning the corner—past the sprawling garden of plants growing out of plastic containers in front of Uncle Liu's place—and walked into the alley, she caught sight of that flagrant playboy, the one who'd done something to Xie Qingcheng. The shameless little brat, sitting right outside on the curb of the street, his arms around his knees and his eyes bright red. Seeing someone come out of the alleyway, He Yu stood up and leaned forward, hesitating. When he realized it wasn't Xie Qingcheng, his face fell, hollowing out like a frosted eggplant.

His behavior instantly confirmed Li Miaoqing's suspicions.

Infuriated, she strode right up to him and brought her basket slamming down on this eggplant's head. At 5:30 a.m., on the street, this old woman dressed in garish pajamas was beating up a hungover young man without any compunctions whatsoever. "How dare you show up here?" she spat. "How dare you?!"

He Yu was stunned. He sniffed, the tip of his nose bright red, allowing her to beat him as he asked, "Auntie, how…how… How did you know…? Did…did he tell you?"

Blood pressure rose in Li Miaoqing's head. What the hell was he saying? Confessing right away?! All her guesses were right! It was this homosexual animal! She threw her basket aside and pointed right in his face. "Does he even need to tell me? I saw him as he was coming back last night—do you think I couldn't guess? I was slumming it in all sorts of dirty dancehalls before you were even born—do you think I couldn't freaking figure it out? Huh? Tell me, what did you do last night?! How dare you come here for him?!"

Cursing, she shoved him again. "What kind of motherless brute are you? Huh? You just had to have your way with him, even at his age, then force yourself

on him and throw him away—you wanted to feel good about yourself, did you? You wanted to go out with your shitty friends and brag about it, right?" She had been a hooker, after all. What she envisioned was a whole other story.

Her heart ached the more she spoke. Lifting one slippered foot, she kicked He Yu right in the middle. "What the hell are you playing at? Why'd you try to play with him?! You're… You should have your pick of anyone you want, so why'd you come after him?! How the fuck do you have the guts to come here?! How dare you come here!"

He Yu was rather quick on the uptake. He quickly understood what Li Miaoqing was thinking. He silently allowed her to beat him. She really wasn't holding back at all, and when she finally came to a panting stop, she spat out a lock of hair that had ended up in her mouth and glared at him.

"Get out… Get the hell out!"

Only then did he say anything at all. "Auntie…" He spoke with scarlet eyes. "I just wanted to know how he's doing today… Last night…last night, I…"

"He's not dead yet!" She cut him off, furious. "He's still alive! How dare you bring up what happened last night—you want me to drag you to the police station myself, huh?"

He knew she'd misunderstood, but he didn't want to explain.

If he hadn't seen the tears in Xie Qingcheng's eyes, would he in his delirious sadness have done something worthy only of animals? He didn't know. And he remembered what he'd done in the nightclub, the beastly things Li Miaoqing meant. Even though it hadn't happened last night, what right did he have to retort?

"Why are you still standing there? Get the hell out! If you stay a second longer, I don't care if he won't call the cops—I'll fucking do it myself! You little brat… And he brought you home for New Year's Eve dinner! What an ungrateful little snake… You…you… I've seen all there is to see of you bastard playboys." She only grew angrier. Thankfully, no one was on the streets right now, and hardly anyone would pass by. She cursed him out harder and harder, holding nothing back. "I've had it with you spoiled brats!" she spat, pointing at him. "All you do is toy with people!"

"Auntie, I never wanted to…"

"And you say you didn't? Fine…fine…! Tell me, on New Year's Eve when you sat in our alleyway, were you planning it out? Did you set it up so he had no choice but to bring you home?"

His lips quivered. There was nothing he could say. "Yes…"

Her temper burned even hotter. "Did you think he was handsome, so you wouldn't give it up and kept pursuing him, sticking to him and refusing to let go until he had no choice but to reciprocate?"

"…Yes," mumbled He Yu.

Li Miaoqing was shaking all over. "Then, tell me—that night, on New Year's Eve, were you upset that Xiao-Xie's ex-wife had come back, so you… So you seduced him, you lied to him… You…you took advantage of him, kicked him when he was down, and tricked him into letting you—you humiliated him all night long, didn't you?!"

His mouth shook. He couldn't say a single thing in his defense. "Yes…but…"

“No buts about it!” She slapped him across the face. “You animal! Worse than Ximen Qing himself![3] Open your eyes and look! He’s a man! He’s your senior! Trying to have a go at him—are you shameless or what? Huh? Are you a sack of shit or what?!”

He Yu didn’t want to try and explain things. “I…I want to see him again… okay?” he said, hoarse. “Is…is he okay?”

“Why? He’s better off without you! It’s better if he never sees you again!” she roared. “Get the hell out right now—move aside! I’m his fucking adoptive mom! I’ll take care of him. I don’t need you here trying to have him at your beck and call, a pump and dump, thrown away once you’re done having your fun! What now? You humiliated him, then felt bad about it—you felt like you didn’t have enough, so you’re pulling the make-up card?”

The situation had really been completely misunderstood. When had he ever pump-and-dumped Xie Qingcheng? When did he dare keep him at his beck and call?

But Li Miaoqing was truly upset. Her eyes were sparking flames, and He Yu had no idea how he could quell her rage, or how to explain everything that had happened.

In truth, his own heart was a shattered mess. All he was relying on was that last wisp of protectiveness he felt for Xie Qingcheng, to do what he asked him to do when he’d left—to calm himself down, to keep the sickness from getting the better of him. Those words were the only reason he could last this long. The only reason he could stand there in front of Li Miaoqing like a sane person.

Her features were crumpled with rage. “Are you still trying to fucking stick around?”

He opened his mouth, but failed to say a word. He was silent for a long time before telling her, eyes red, “Auntie… Then…take good care of him… If he needs me, if he needs anything…contact me, okay? I’ll give you my phone number…”

He didn’t care what Li Miaoqing thought. That was his bottom line. He forced his phone number onto her, then turned in utter exhaustion to slump away.

Chapter 170:
Agreeing to the Wedding

XIE QINGCHENG took some time off to rest at home for two days.

He spent his time almost entirely in bed, unmoving. The monitor dashboard on his phone was set up to notify him if the numbers stayed dangerous for too long, but the alarm never rang. He Yu didn't want to disappoint Xie Qingcheng, so he did his best to keep himself under control. He did his best to keep himself from flaring up.

On the afternoon of the second day, Xie Qingcheng woke from his nap to find someone sitting at his bedside. "Auntie Li, I'm fine," he said, assuming it was Li Miaoqing. "Don't worry about me…"

"Gege."

A voice full of heartbreak and worry brought him back to his senses. Eyes focusing, he saw that the person sitting by his bed wasn't Li Miaoqing, but Xie Xue.

He said nothing. It had been a long time since they'd talked properly; ever since Xie Xue and Wei Dongheng's relationship became public, Xie Qingcheng hadn't said a single word to her. Even now, she was a bit scared to face him, but he was so clearly sick she couldn't help but worry. The combination of all those emotions on her face made her look almost ridiculous.

"Why are you back?" he asked. "Don't you have class in the afternoon?"

"Auntie Li said you weren't feeling well, so I took time off to come be with you." She helped him sit up, shoving a down pillow behind his head. He had already changed, and the big light in the room was off. It was too dark for her to see the marks on his neck.

She took his hand, worried. "Ge, what's wrong?" she said, very gently. "Have you been to the hospital?"

He wasn't in a good mood in the first place, but after he looked at her, he felt even worse. He turned silently away, and she tactfully dropped the subject. She sat with him for a while longer. Then, something seemed to occur to her. "Ge, wait one second."

She went off to dig around beside the dinner table, then came back with an opened can of peaches.

"Look, when I was little and feeling sick, you'd bribe me to take my medicine with peach syrup." She spooned some of the heartwarmingly sweet fruit for her brother. "You tricked me so well I thought canned peaches were actual medicine. I always wondered how medicine could taste so good, how wonderful it was to have this when I was sick."

Xie Qingcheng took the spoon and took a bite, his face completely flat. Finally, he spoke up: "That's because you've been dumb since you were a kid. Easily tricked."

Xie Xue said nothing.

“You still are.”

She knew he was talking about Wei Dongheng again, and couldn’t help but feel upset.

He slowly finished the peaches. She didn’t say a word the whole time. He put the glass jar aside, slightly reinvigorated. Finally he noticed everything she had brought home—a whole pile of bird’s nest, ginseng, royal jelly, caterpillar fungus, and noble dendrobium. In short, enough expensive supplements to stop his heart. This was seriously too much. Whoever sent this must not have had any medical training at all, pouncing on this excuse to curry favor and sending him the whole royal apothecary in a gesture of sincerity.

Xie Qingcheng fell silent. “Did Wei Dongheng bring you here?”

Hesitating, Xie Xue nodded.

“Where is he?”

“He left after he dropped me off. He was afraid you’d get angry at the sight of him…”

A cold snort. “That little blondie knows fear?”

Sadness shone in Xie Xue’s eyes. “Ge, don’t be like that… I know you’re doing it for my sake. I know you’re worried I’ll be tricked. You’re scared he’ll humiliate me. You’re worried that he doesn’t have any prospects. I know you brought me up afraid I would get hurt, that you’ve always hoped for me to live in peace. That’s why you’re so set against him.”

He said nothing.

“I understand,” she said. “But sometimes…sometimes…could you trust me a little bit, too?” Her voice fell to a whisper.

Perhaps it was because he was sick and too tired to argue, or maybe the matter of He Yu had left him in too much distress. In the depths of Xie Qingcheng’s heart, something finally swayed—he realized that the matters of love couldn’t even be fully understood by those personally involved, let alone a mere bystander. He leaned back against his pillow, his face unmoved, but didn’t say anything else.

Courage bolstered, she continued. “Ge, I told you before—Wei Dongheng and I have been dating for over a year now. I know maybe some people would look at this and think a year isn’t that long, but we’ve realized that we miss each other every day we spend apart. When he was in the northwest, he wrote me a lot of letters. You know that he’s not the type to write a lot, usually…”

Xie Qingcheng’s expression stiffened. It was clear he wanted to say Wei Dongheng was a good-for-nothing.

Xie Xue took his hand. “Wei Dongheng’s been a headache for his parents ever since he was little. He skipped class, went street racing, pulled pranks… I know that, and I also hated him back then, because he’d always bully me. I thought he was really nasty, up until one Christmas break in high school, when I came back and saw him hovering around in the alleyway. I was worried he’d see me. I was scared he’d yank on my ponytail, so I hid myself away. Ge, do you know what I saw?”

He didn’t say anything.

“I saw him come out from the convenience store with a pile of snacks and drinks. There were a lot of homeless people lying around the alley, and while they were asleep, he sneakily put all that stuff beside them and sped off on his bike. He probably thought doing good deeds didn’t make him look cool and was scared his friends would find out, so he pedaled as fast as he could. It looked like he was trying to run away, but then his wheel slipped and he and his bike were both sent flying on the sidewalk.” She couldn’t help but smile at the memory.

“He crawled to his feet on the slippery ice and looked around all shifty-eyed, then fixed his hair and pretended nothing happened. He got back on his bike and rode away all wobbly. That’s when I realized he wasn’t as bad as other people said.”

With Xie Qingcheng actually listening to her, Xie Xue slowly told him everything that’d been building up in her heart.

“Ge, you’re the one who taught me ever since I was little to judge people by myself, instead of blindly believing what other people say. I’ve been judging Wei Dongheng for myself for over ten years. He’s not an obedient type, but I know that his heart is kind and dutiful. I’ve seen him bring stray cats and dogs to vet rescues all the time—I’ve seen him bring food and drink to beggars as well. Did you know? One time, he stared at a little wildflower on the street and smiled all dumb to himself. He has a good heart, a heart that sees beauty and timidity. It’s just that he’s never shown it to anyone.”

Her brother arched a brow. “Why not?”

“Because everyone curses him. They make fun of him; they compare him to He Yu. He hates it, so he goes out of his way to keep from acting like him, a rich young master everyone praises to the heavens. He’s really prideful, just like He Yu. When we started dating, I asked him why he only let people see his bad side, why he hid all his kindness and vulnerability. He got all grumpy and wouldn’t say, and when I kept asking him, he finally folded and told me huffily he didn’t want to be like He Yu. He said Wei Dongheng is Wei Dongheng—why should he be another He Yu? Were kids only right if they behaved like He Yu, good at everything and polite in every way? He refused. To be honest, I’ve observed both of them. I know that Wei Dongheng’s personality is a lot simpler than He Yu’s. He scrawls all his worst traits on his face, but on the inside, he’s very soft and sweet.”

Silence in response.

“Gege, I really do love Wei Dongheng.”

Xie Qingcheng seemed exhausted. “How much do you love him?”

Xie Xue thought about it. “Irreplaceably,” she said.

He hadn’t expected to hear something like that from her. He felt his heart skip a beat—he turned and stared at her. He Yu had said the same thing to him. *I love you. I want to spend every moment with you. Nothing and nobody could ever replace you.*

“Ge,” she said. “I’ve had feelings for him for ten years. I know I won’t ever love anyone else the way I love him.”

He turned away.

“I kept a diary. I wrote all sorts of things in it. I think you’ll understand him better if you read it. If you want to…”

“That’s private to you. I won’t.”

She fell silent for a long beat. She didn't quite dare to speak anymore. She hesitated, then tried, "Then, it's okay, Ge. If you don't want to talk about this, I'll stop. I'll tell you jokes and stories. I'll cheer you up, okay?" She took his hand and shook it, crouching down sadly by his bed and looking up at him. "It's been so long since we properly talked. Gege, are you really still mad at me?"

He paused. "I was never mad at you. I just think you're too reckless."

"What?"

"You're a girl; if you two were getting close, you need to learn to protect yourself. But you two…" He didn't finish the sentence, but Xie Xue froze. Realization dawned, and her face flushed bright red. Xie Qingcheng cleared his throat, disappointed. "Tell me—was that a good decision?"

Talking about premarital sex with her old-fashioned older brother would be a total waste of time. Li Ruoqiu had complained to her before that when she and Xie Qingcheng were dating, he'd never so much as kissed her of his own volition. It was good to be cautious in a relationship, but acting like that was seriously too passionless—like they were employees working off some kind of operations manual.

"On that note… Ge…there's something else I've been wanting to talk to you about."

"What?"

Hesitating, she fell silent.

"…Don't tell me you two have already discussed marriage."

She froze. "How did you know?"

He didn't move for a long time. With no emotion in either face or voice, he said, "Bring me the cigarettes on the table."

Xie Xue didn't want Xie Qingcheng to smoke, but given the situation, she was too afraid to refuse him anything. She quickly grabbed the pack of smokes. Not even caring if she was there or not anymore, he lit one and smoked half of it in utter silence. The room was soundless. Dappled light came in through the swaying curtains, shining on her face. He could tell the flush on her cheeks hadn't faded at all.

"When did this come up?"

"Before…before he went to the northwest," stammered Xie Xue. "You know their family, Dage—they're a military family, but he seriously doesn't have the personality for the army. His parents were going to slowly move him into business, but they said he had to go train in the northwest first. He agreed, but he made them agree to a condition…"

"What condition." Xie Qingcheng tapped the ash off his cigarette.

Her face was bright red now. "He told his parents, once he finished his training and came back, after he graduated…he'd marry me." She lowered her head the instant the words were out of her mouth, afraid he would pick up the mug beside him and hurl it at her face, screaming at her to get out.

Shockingly enough, though, nothing happened.

There was a long silence before she heard another click. In the quiet room, it sounded almost shattered. There was the faint scent of smoke. He finished one cigarette and lit another.

"Ge…" She mustered up her courage to look up, staring fearfully at her brother's face, shrouded in faint spirals of smoke.

He quietly smoked without looking at her. He leaned back against his headboard, the cigarette held in his slender fingers. His eyes looked particularly hazy, staring unseeing at the white ceiling. Since he didn't say anything, Xie Xue didn't dare make a sound either. She buried her fingers in her dress, her whole body wound tight with anticipation.

He finished his cigarette.

Flicking the ash from the tip, he threw the end in the ashtray nearby. "Then what do you think?" he said hoarsely—perhaps from the smoking.

She blinked. She was ready to take a verbal lashing from Xie Qingcheng, but she'd never imagined having to answer this question.

Elder Brother Xie had always been a dictator. He gave Xie Xue the utmost protection, but would never take her own feelings into account. When she heard him actually posing this question to her, her first reaction was…she had no idea how to react at all.

"Now that you're telling me everything, you might as well do it from the top." After his utter mental breakdown, he was calm enough now for this. He looked up through peach-blossom eyes at his little sister. "Do you want to marry him?"

"I…"

Her face was so red it could drip blood, but a certain light flashed in her eyes. It was somehow familiar—he must've seen it before, but he couldn't remember when.

"Ge…I really do love him… I…"

"You know marriage isn't a game. It's different from just dating. It's a responsibility to the other person, an oath and a duty. Do you think you two are suitable for this?"

Xie Xue said nothing.

"I know you think he's kind and loyal, but he's younger than you, and his temper is bad. He's known for his willfulness in everything he does, and who he is as a person. You would be very tired at his side, Xie Xue."

"He's…he's already improved a lot… You all don't understand him…"

"Then how much have you understood him?" Xie Qingcheng cleared his throat. "You don't need to tell me how you've observed him for ten years. That's just someone's past, and all you saw was a part of it. No more. Do you know what his family has planned for him? Do you know what his own plans are for his future? You told me he wanted to marry you as soon as he graduated, then go into business. That's the marketplace, Xie Xue. Not a school. How old are you this year?"

"Twenty-five."

"Him?"

"…Twenty-three."

"He's only twenty-three. It'll take ten years for him to reach your brother's age. How sure are you that he'll love you for ten years? There's plenty of young and pretty girls he'll be doing business around, and those of his family's position would be mingling with people from the entertainment industry. You're a teacher at a performing arts school; you have an idea of what those people are like. How many schemes and temptations are involved."

"He wouldn't. Even when he was little—"

"He's only twenty-three this year, Xie Xue. At twenty-three, I had no idea I'd end up like this." He hesitated. He thought of He Yu—when he'd been twenty-three, He Yu was only a ten-year-old boy. Who could've dreamed of all the insane things that'd happen between them afterward?

"Xie Xue, Wei Dongheng's life has only just begun. Some things, you can't predict at all." He lit another cigarette, taking a drag and coughing faintly. He stubbed it out before he finished it. "Take a step back—even if he really wouldn't do any of that, given his status, there's going to be plenty of people throwing themselves at him, and all sorts of wine-and-dine dealings. Could you endure it?"

"He told me he wouldn't." She was very certain, and something glimmered in her eyes. It was that same light Xie Qingcheng could've sworn he'd seen before.

He fell silent for a beat. At this point, he wouldn't even get angry anymore. He was only very calm. "There is no shortage of kind and loyal people in this world. Wei Dongheng is not the only one. What exactly do you love him for?"

"I don't know, either. Love… It's…hard to explain… I just feel happier when I see him, and he's the same. As soon as we're together, we have so much to say, and as soon as we're apart, we miss each other badly. I'm always happy when I'm with him, and I feel very safe. I know he wouldn't hurt me. It's the same kind of safe I feel with you, Gege. Do you…understand, Ge?"

Xie Qingcheng said nothing. If Xie Xue had told him this a year ago, he might not have understood how she felt. But now, when he heard her describe her feelings, he felt a tug on his heartstrings deep inside. Someone else had once played that string, but that was not someone whose feelings Xie Qingcheng could ever reciprocate. He was quiet for a long beat.

"Even if it leaves you bloody—would you regret it?"

"That won't happen."

"I'm asking you if you'll regret it."

"If that really comes to pass, I won't regret it." Her voice had begun to shake.

He didn't say anything.

Through the hazy smoke, he narrowed his eyes, lips parting. For some reason, his vision seemed to show him a different sight—He Yu, pulling on his hands and sobbing on that day he confessed. He realized why he found that light in Xie Xue's eyes so familiar. He'd seen it that day He Yu showed him his heart, when he finally confessed the love that lay within.

"I'm the one who's so miserably wretched, a moth drawn to the flame… I don't think it's right either, but I still love you. Because I've really lost my mind—I fucking knew how this would turn out, but I insisted on walking this hopeless path

to the end. I'm so pathetic, a total wreck, but I still want to hold you. I'm covered in dirt and grime, but I still love the snow in the sky… It's my fault, not yours… Loving you hurts so bad… Xie Qingcheng…it hurts so bad… I can't have you… I know I have to let go…but…I still love you, each and every day…"

Xie Qingcheng felt like something inside his chest was caving in. He slowly closed his eyes. In that blink of time, he seemed to have aged so many years.

"Xie Xue."

"Ge."

"What if I still refuse?"

"Then…" It wasn't her voice shaking anymore; it was her whole being. Agony and torment were visible in the lines of her body. "If you're…still going to refuse…"

"What will you do if I say no?"

Xie Xue knelt before his bed, despairing. Her eyes filled with tears. "I…will do as you say," she said eventually, through sobs. "Because I love you. I love you best. You're the one who brought me up. I don't even know how much suffering you went through—I'm sure there's so much I don't even know about. If you really dislike him, if you're truly opposed to the two of us being together, I'll do as you say. But, Ge…I'll never be happy again."

He opened his eyes. He didn't say anything for a very long time.

In the end, he lowered his head, as if trying to hide an emotion that flashed in his eyes, an emotion he so rarely felt. He rose. He was lying in bed fully clothed, so he stood very easily. In that moment, he didn't want to be in this room anymore. His heart ached a great deal, and the narrow confines of the room were stifling. He felt like he couldn't breathe.

"Ge—"

When Xie Qingcheng walked past Xie Xue, he didn't look down or look back. He only put his hand on top of her head, as firmly as any other time she'd come crying to him after some trouble. She looked up, but she couldn't see his face. He still wasn't looking at her, so all she saw was his tall and broad silhouette.

"Then go. Remember, this was your decision. I hope you won't regret it."

"Ge…" She started shaking harder.

"But if you really do regret it, if you think you made the wrong choice—don't be ashamed. Everyone is living their first time on Earth, and many decisions are made for the first time, without knowing all the consequences. Nobody can predict right or wrong. If you really make a mistake, just remember—as long as I'm alive, you still have a home. Whenever and wherever you are. I'll take care of you. I'll stand behind you until the day I die."

Tears immediately spilled from Xie Xue's eyes. She'd never imagined this would be the outcome—she'd always been terrified of telling Xie Qingcheng. In her mind, her big brother was strong and powerful, but absolutely domineering. She never would have believed that when she truly, honestly, and sincerely told him her choice, he would give her an answer like this.

She couldn't hold back anymore. With a wail, she started bawling, getting up to her feet and wrapping her arms around his middle. She buried her face against his

back; since she was little, that broad and arrow-straight back had carried her, tired, scraped, or sleepy, all the way home…

Despite the happy occasion, Xie Xue was sobbing loudly. She wouldn't let him go no matter what. "Ge! Ge…"

"Why are you crying?" Xie Qingcheng still didn't turn around. His face was hidden from view, and his voice remained impassive. "You have to grow up for yourself, Xie Xue. I'll always be there for you, but…" His voice trailed off. He fell silent. In the end, he patted her on the hand. "Let go. How old are you? Don't you have any shame?"

"Nope."

"Let go."

"I'm shameless."

More silence.

"Ge, hold me. I love you so much."

"…Are you fucking dreaming?"

"No, I'm shameless."

The wan light shining into the room now looked so warm. Xie Xue's teary but overjoyed voice came through the windows—

"Ge, I'm going to Wei Dongheng's house for dinner next week… What should I wear…?"

"Your skirt has to be past knee length."

"Ah… Why are you like this again…"

Their conversation gradually became light and cheerful.

Outside the house, He Yu still lingered. He couldn’t leave Xie Qingcheng.

He leaned against the icy wall. He had overheard their entire conversation. Standing up straight, before the siblings could come out and see him, he flicked off the dust that had gathered on his clothes and slowly walked into the distance.

Chapter 171:
I Never Would Have Thought

BEFORE XIE XUE left for the Wei family home, Xie Qingcheng helped style her hair—when she was little, he had always been the one doing her hair. Even after she grew up and learned how to do it on her own, she could never make it look as nice as her brother could.

"While you're over there, you don't have to be afraid. Say whatever comes to mind; just be yourself. You're my little sister, and you don't need to ingratiate yourself to anyone."

Xie Xue nodded. After a moment, she blurted out, "Ge, can you come with me?"

"No. This is something you have to face on your own."

Noticing her nervous silence, Xie Qingcheng sighed and retrieved an old brocade box from a locked chest of drawers.

His sister was shocked. "This is…"

"This was Mom's favorite jade pendant. She wore it the first time she met our grandfather. It can go with you, so you'll remember that we're always by your side."

She accepted the ruyi pendant with both hands, voice trembling with emotion. "Didn't…didn't that person break…break it?"

Pausing at the sudden mention of *that* person, he chose to brusquely move on from the topic. "I had it repaired by a craftsman in the antiques mall." He loosened the cord of the necklace and carefully looped it around her neck. "Try it on."

The ruyi pendant, carved from fine-grained old jade, was all classic elegance against Xie Xue's graceful neck. "Does it suit me?" she asked anxiously.

"Mm."

"Really?" Her voice was still unsure.

He answered her with a question. "Do you think I'm good-looking?"

"Wah, of course you're handsome," she muttered. "You've been handsome since you were a kid… How many girls gave you confession letters again? You've had girls running after you calling you 'husband' since middle school…"

"Okay, enough of that," he interrupted her. He paused. "You're my sister, so believe in yourself. Xie Xue, you're extraordinary. You're good in every way, and you're not at all lesser than anyone from the Wei family."

As she stared at him, a bubble of warmth surged up in her chest. Since she was little, every time she opened up to her brother, she would be rewarded with a giant boost of strength. She turned and threw her arms around him. "Ge, thank you."

Xie Qingcheng patted her on the back.

But a few seconds later, she opened her mouth again. "…Ge, I-I'm still nervous."

He had no words for this. Well, whatever—it was understandable.

Their parents were already gone when Li Ruoqiu had first been introduced to the family, but even when she was just having a meal with Xie Xue and Auntie Li, her hands still shook so much she could hardly hold her chopsticks—and this was to say nothing of meeting Wei Dongheng's giant family like Xie Xue was about to do. Comforting her any further wouldn't be of any use. Things would just have to work out on their own.

Looking down at Xie Xue as they separated, he sighed. "Your face is pale. Do you want to touch up your makeup?"

"I'm so nervous I feel sick… I could practically puke," she mumbled, her face twisting in discomfort.

"You're usually so brave. Who stole your guts this time?" Xie Qingcheng handed her her makeup box. "Don't overthink it. If they don't like you, it's their mistake. I'd be overjoyed. No point letting that little blondie steal you away at a bargain."

Xie Xue had no response to that.

"All right, nothing's going to happen. Go on."

That evening at the Wei manor, Wei Dongheng's mother enthusiastically ushered both of them through the door.

"Come, Xiao-Xue, sit. Don't be nervous. Do you want some fruit? Should I turn the TV on?"

"A-Auntie, I don't need to sit… Whatever you're working on, I-I-I can help."

Madam Wei laughed. "Don't panic, we're not going to eat you."

This was Xie Xue's first time meeting Wei Dongheng's family, so of course she felt awkward. Standing next to Wei Dongheng, she barely dared to breathe. Countless terrifying possibilities raced through her head: What if Madam Wei suddenly pulled out a check and said, "I'll give you five hundred million to leave my son"? What if Wei Dongheng's father scoffed and demanded, "What gave someone like you the impression that you could step across this threshold"? Every scene from the most melodramatic of TV shows played uncontrollably through her head.

As she broke out into a cold sweat, Wei Dongheng whispered into her ear, "I know what you're thinking."

"Ah…?" She was still trembling in her boots.

"You always think too much—step out of the classroom for a sec. Relax."

"Oh…"

"My family isn't like what you're imagining. I've been training them since I was a kid. They have nowhere near as many rules as the He family. My dad, my mom, my grandparents, even my siblings let me do whatever I want. Come on, come upstairs with me, I'll show you my childhood pictures."

Barely processing any of what he said, she was still nervous to the point of tears. "Can I go home…?"

"…Maybe wait until after dinner. My grandma personally made a ginseng chicken soup for you. She hardly ever cooks anymore, and the last person who got to drink her soup was someone you've probably seen on the news. You have to at least try it."

Her knees went so weak that she had to grab the wall to stay on her feet. "M-maybe you should just put me in the soup instead…"

He didn't know how to respond to that.

Her bumpkinly panic only reached its peak when she sat down at the dinner table with the rest of the Wei family. For all he was the supposed black sheep of the family, it was obvious they all loved Wei Dongheng very much. They wanted to make a good impression for Xie Xue's first visit, and aside from a few of his brothers who were tied up with work, the entire family was all present, seated around a big round table in order of seniority.

"I'll introduce my grandparents first. This is my grandpa."

Xie Xue shot to her feet and bowed toward the sprightly old man in the seat of honor. "Grandma, nice to meet you."

There was an awkward silence. "…Grandma is over here," said Wei Dongheng. "This is Grandpa."

His grandma had already gone gray, but her hair was still coiffed in elegant curls. She had a pale complexion, contrasted by a stylish touch of lipstick, still beautiful in her advanced age. She smiled and extended a hand to Xie Xue.

Xie Xue hurriedly turned toward her. "Sorry, my bad. Hello, Grandpa."

The table went silent for a moment, but in the end they couldn't keep their composure. The entire family began laughing out loud, starting with Wei Dongheng's grandpa.

"Lao-san,[4] you found an interesting girl. I like her." The old man chuckled, then waved a hand at Xie Xue. "Okay, girl, go ahead and sit down. We're going to be one family in the future—no need to be so nervous."

She was so terrified by the Wei family's imposing aura that she was already preparing to be ordered to leave. She wasn't expecting those to be the first words out of the grandfather's mouth. Seeing him raise a hand in her direction, she short-circuited for a second and blurted out without thinking, "A-are you giving me a check?"

The old man boggled, hand pausing on its way to pick up the jug of baijiu liquor. "…What, is my grandson not giving you enough? You want a check too?"

Xie Xue stuttered, unable to get out a single word.

Madam Wei chuckled. "That's not what she meant." She seemed quite pleased with herself. "I know what's going on. I watch those high society dramas too."

"Mom," Wei Dongheng protested, "stop being so embarrassing."

"What! You get a wife and all of a sudden, you're ashamed of your mother?" She tittered and winked at Xie Xue with a hand over her mouth. "He's always been like this. Cares so much about his image. I was worried no one would want him. I do have to thank you—you've solved a big problem for me."

Xie Xue froze. Why wasn't this elite family tossing a check in her face and telling her to get out? This story was absolutely devoid of conflict, no plot at all.

It wasn't like she hadn't had any interactions with wealthy households before. The He family was one, after all. They had loads of rules, and with He Yu's parents constantly absent, the entire villa was always as empty as a haunted house. On the rare few occasions Lü Zhishu came home and He Yu had a friend over, she spent the entire time frowning. Once Xie Xue had heard her say to the housekeeper, "Don't let these kinds of children inside. There are too many valuables around, and what do we know about their integrity?"

Furious as she was, she had refused to go over to He Yu's place ever again.

The poor first impression the He family left on her made her a little biased against everyone in those circles. She was shocked to find that the Wei family would be entirely different. After sharing a meal with them, she found that the whole family were well-educated, reasonable people, who didn't put on any airs. The atmosphere between them was excellent, with the whole family chatting and joking, grandfathers and grandsons teasing each other freely. It couldn't have been more different from the He family. When He Yu, He Jiwei, and Lü Zhishu sat at the same table, they would barely exchange a single word.

Gradually affected by the atmosphere, Xie Xue began to relax too.

"Your hair is beautiful." Wei Dongheng's sister was a gorgeous woman, and she smiled as she ran a lock of Xie Xue's hair between her fingers. "I have a headdress I designed in my studio that would look great on you; you should come upstairs with me and try it. If you like it, you can have it as a gift, to wear for your wedding photos with Lao-san."

"You design hairpieces?!"

She smiled. "That's right."

"She got a doctorate degree in design in Milan," Wei Dongheng cut in. "She's a designer in Bulgari's Chinese branch."

Xie Xue went mute with shock.

"But I hate her designs. They're so tacky they give me a headache. I'll braid you a grass crown instead—that's how you get a more ethereal vibe."

Wei Dongheng's sister kept a smile plastered on her face as she gritted out through her teeth, "Wei Dongheng, do you want to die?"

Conversation at the table stayed lively as everyone offered their input on the wedding coming up in a few months. Maybe their military background meant they held less to strict etiquette, but none of them hesitated to include the new girl who had yet to formally marry in. They all spoke as if they were one family already.

Absorbed in the harmonious atmosphere of the dinner table, Xie Xue's eyes grew damp as she thought of the contrast between this and the disdain she'd suffered her first time interacting with these sorts of people. She didn't know why everyone scoffed about the Wei family's supposed moral decline, claiming that was why they had produced a good-for-nothing like Wei Dongheng, while praising Lü Zhishu and He Jiwei to the high heavens. It clearly wasn't true.

Even as everyone finished eating, the chatter continued. Madam Wei moved next to Xie Xue, taking her hand and striking up a conversation with her.

“Is the food to your taste?” she said. “Lao-san said you liked spicy food, so we made a few stir-fries. Was it seasoned enough? If you like it, let us know ahead of time the next time you visit. I can ask the cook to make it for you again. You’re feeling better now, right? Not so nervous anymore? You’ll get to know everyone in the future, and if there’s anything you need, you can just tell us. Dongheng is so stubborn; if he upsets you, just tell me and I’ll scold him for you. I’ll even beat him up for you. Right, did you like *Precious Princess*? How about *My Transformation into a High Society Madam*?”

“…Mom,” Wei Dongheng protested.

Xie Xue perked up. “Auntie, you like *My Transformation into a High Society Madam* too!”

“That’s right!”

“I had a part-time job working on that show as a continuity supervisor during college!”

“Really?!”

Wei Dongheng was lost. The two of them chatted away cheerfully for a while; they were still going when the Wei patriarch declared everyone was dismissed to go rest.

“All right, all right, it’s not as if you have no one else to talk to,” the old man said. “If you want Miss Xie to watch prime-time TV with you, just call her over later. Aren’t we celebrating Lao-san’s graduation next week? You can talk at the banquet then.”

“That’s right.” Madam Wei turned to Xie Xue. “It’s almost graduation season. We’re planning a banquet and inviting a lot of family friends. You should come too, since you’ll be one of our daughters in the future.”

Now Xie Xue was getting nervous again.

“It’s all right, relax. Oh right, I should get someone to design a prettier, more formal invitation so you can give it to your brother—is that okay? We ought to introduce ourselves to him, too.”

“Okay,” she said quietly, face red. After a pause she continued, “I have a neighbor, an auntie who’s not a blood relative, but she was like a mother to me and my brother after my mom passed. Auntie, can I bring her too…?” She started growing shy again, but was insistent in her request.

Madam Wei looked at her, letting out a woeful sigh. “It’s rare to see a kid as appreciative as you.” She gave Xie Xue a hug. “Of course you can. We all have to thank her, and your brother as well. They raised you into such a good, sensible person.”

That was the end of her first meeting with the Wei family. She’d never expected it would be such a fun, relaxed meal. She was still a bit out of it when Wei Dongheng brought her downstairs to the garden for a walk.

Absentmindedly, she kept repeating, “Wei Dongheng, your mom is great… Your grandpa is great… Your sister is great… Everyone in your family is great.”

Wei Dongheng looked at her like she was an idiot and rolled his eyes, tugging her closer. “What about me? You listed out everyone in my family, but you missed me.”

“Oh, I forgot.”

“…You have to make it up to me somehow.” He pulled her in and leaned down to hug her with a smile. But as he did, she covered her mouth and jerked her head to the side. After a few seconds, she retched, her face pale.

Startled, Wei Dongheng asked, “What’s wrong? Did you eat something off?”

She shook her head, clutching at his arm as she fought off the waves of nausea. “Where’s your bathroom?” she managed to get out. “The closest one.”

He quickly took her inside.

Xie Xue threw up nearly everything she ate for dinner. When the attack finally ebbed, she stared blankly at her wan face in the mirror, not understanding why she’d gotten so sick so suddenly. As she considered the possibilities, something occurred to her, and her heart thumped in her chest. The last bit of blood drained from her face.

She…she couldn’t be…

Chapter 172:
She Was Pregnant

XIE XUE really was pregnant.

Some news was nominally good, but could leave a person apprehensive and dismayed when it arrived at the wrong time. Luckily, Wei Dongheng and Xie Xue were already engaged. The sudden arrival of a child left the two youngsters in an awkward situation, but they weren't entirely at a loss. After their initial panic, it felt as if the fast-forward key had been pressed on life. Everything fell into place step by step.

They introduced themselves to each other's families, discussed wedding arrangements… There was no need to describe how furious Xie Qingcheng was when he found out Xie Xue was pregnant, but what was done was already done, and he was an older brother who would never allow his younger sister to be hurt. No matter how angry he was, he had to grit his teeth and give in. It was a chaotic process, and the entire extended family had to get together several times. After the sixteenth cup Xie Qingcheng dashed on the floor while yelling at Wei Dongheng—he didn't even spare an old cadre like the Wei patriarch, and the old man nearly lost control and got in a physical brawl with the thirty-something brat—everyone tried to come to a resolution and stop arguing.

What was the point? It wasn't as if they could argue the baby out of existence.

The Wei patriarch was still huffing and puffing at Xie Qingcheng—he took issue with the fact that he didn't even spare Xie Xue in his anger. "Are you yelling at a member of my family?"

Xie Qingcheng shattered the seventeenth cup. "That's my fucking sister. I'll yell at her whenever I damn well want!"

The situation was finally stabilized through everyone else's collective effort, and after one more meeting, they decided that they would send out a wave of invitations and hold a wedding banquet as soon as Wei Dongheng got his diploma in June. Thus, the little sister Xie Qingcheng had taken care of all by himself for so many years would finally be marrying into another family.

There were some benefits to the chaos. All his fretting over the wedding and back-and-forth with the Wei family helped Xie Qingcheng forget the disaster that was his own personal life. Although his tongue remained sharp, he was working to ensure his sister's future as he ran around attending to Xie Xue's affairs. In contrast, he didn't even want to say a word about his own rotten situation. It was simply a tragedy however he looked at it.

One day, he took Xie Xue to a luxurious boutique to attend a fitting for her bespoke wedding dress. While she was in the changing room trying it on, Xie Qingcheng waited outside—he wasn't there to give commentary, just to take a look at the final result. Wei Dongheng's sister was also there, and there was no need to question a professional designer's taste.

Two people walked past the couch where he sat—Lü Zhishu and He Yu. The invitations for the Wei family's engagement banquet had been delivered, and Lü

Zhishu was one of the recipients. She couldn't wear just anything to a major occasion like this, so she had come to the same boutique for a new outfit.

She didn't spot Xie Qingcheng when she walked through the door, midway through speaking to He Yu. "Your father has been unwell, and he's always feeling down… I don't know what's up with him… Ai, he won't be able to make it to the banquet this time, but you're already twenty, and so handsome at that. You can do the networking for him. Mom will pick out an outfit for you; you'll surely look even better than that Wei Dongheng—"

Before she finished her sentence, she saw his face drop. She paused and looked at the man who had practically glued He Yu to the spot. Xie Qingcheng sat on the pale gold sofa in a plain buttoned shirt, calm and composed as his gaze passed over mother and son. A strange atmosphere surrounded the three of them.

Lü Zhishu knew what had happened between Xie Qingcheng and He Yu. She had seen what her son looked like doing all those things with this old man in the recording. But she was pretending not to know a thing. Meanwhile, the two men had to hide their relationship at all costs, which was also no easy ask—at least, it was no easy ask for He Yu.

The blood drained from his face so rapidly that the shop clerk noticed and nervously hurried over. "Mister He, you… Are you feeling unwell?"

"…No." He stared at Xie Qingcheng without blinking. "I'm doing very well," he added quietly, after a pause.

Xie Qingcheng and Lü Zhishu had previously been personal doctor and employer, and had known each other for years. By all rights, they ought to greet each other and exchange some pleasantries. So he set down his magazine, got to his feet, and straightened his tie with long, elegant fingers. He extended a hand to her. "Mrs. Lü."

Hah, this manwhore has two faces. She kept her face carefully blank as she raised a slightly overplucked eyebrow and extended a chubby hand with fingers as puffy as roast sausages.

They exchanged a quick handshake, then let go.

"I have to congratulate Doctor Xie." Lü Zhishu was a businesswoman, and plastering a saccharine smile on her face came as easily to her as breathing. Even if she utterly hated Xie Qingcheng, even if her insides were brimming with malice, she could still summon laughter that tinkled like silver bells. "And my congratulations to your sister too. She's marrying the husband of her dreams. Where is Miss Xie?"

He thanked her and said, "She's trying on her dress inside."

"Is that so? Aiya, then we won't bother her. He Yu, come here. Let's go look over there. Is Cindy here? She also goes by Xiao-Bai."

"Mrs. Lü, Cindy got married. She's not working here anymore," the clerk said.

"Oh? Was it that…that customer from last time?" Her hips swayed as she walked away, gossiping with the clerk. At his confirmation, she said, "Looking at the way they spoke to each other, I already suspected. But he's already in his fifties, and didn't he have a wife? The gold diggers these days…" Lü Zhishu clicked her tongue. "He Yu, why are you still standing there? Come over here."

He Yu stared at Xie Qingcheng for a long moment before he lowered his head and followed his mother away.

Xie Xue's fitting took a long time; in the end Lü Zhishu and He Yu made their selections and left the VIP changing room before she did. He Yu was wearing a finely tailored suit, with a cut that emphasized the line of his waist. He stood in the display room with his eyes lowered, attracting admiring gazes from all around. His good looks weren't quite as obvious when he wore casual student clothing, but the Western-style suit emphasized his 189-centimeter stature and fine proportions. His elegant demeanor emerged like fresh snow on plum blossoms, rich beauty encased by an icy outer shell.

Xie Qingcheng wasn't one to care much about appearances, but his gaze still paused for a moment on He Yu's figure. He Yu's eyes were fixed, entranced, on Xie Qingcheng's through the mirror. There were so many people around, but he only had eyes for Xie Qingcheng.

Xie Qingcheng quickly averted his gaze.

"How is it? Are you satisfied?" Lü Zhishu asked.

He Yu lowered his eyes and gave her a cursory response, wearing an injured look that would have been inscrutable to anyone who didn't know the truth of the situation.

Lü Zhishu continuously praised her son's good looks, and the sales clerks chimed in with their agreements. As they were about to leave, she spotted He Yu's wrist monitor. "Your digital watch is too plain; it's not even branded," she said. "Let's get you a new one today. Mom will take you upstairs to pick a mechanical watch that suits you better. You can take that one off."

He grabbed her wrist. "Mom, this was a gift."

She raised an eyebrow. "Who?"

His gaze slid toward Xie Qingcheng. "Someone very important."

Lü Zhishu paused.

Was there any way she could fail to figure out who gave him that damn watch? Her ponderous cheeks wobbled as she forced them into a smile that hovered between fake and malevolent, amicably patting He Yu on the hand. "You're just too sentimental." She turned to the clerk. "All right, package everything up for us. I'll pay the bill."

She had personally witnessed how deep He Yu's feelings for Xie Qingcheng ran today. Her son's eyes were practically glued to the man, without the slightest care for what anyone else might think. Their ex-Doctor Xie, meanwhile, was the very model of a hypocritical prostitute—so wild in bed, yet wearing such a cold mask in front of other people. It figured that penniless commoners like Xie Qingcheng and Xie Xue would never have a relationship with a rich man out of real affection. It was all just gold-digging. These siblings were just as good as each other at seduction, and the brother was even more shameless than the sister.

After paying, she intended to say a quick goodbye to Xie Qingcheng and leave. But that was when the door to the other VIP changing room slowly opened, and a breathtakingly gorgeous young lady walked out.

Xie Xue wasn't her usual sloppily-put-together self. When she walked out in her wedding dress, a hush fell over the entire room. The snowy white dress adorned

with golden embroidery draped to the ground, a gauzy cloud of chiffon enveloping her like an early morning mist. The new bride's peaceful beauty lit up the entire showroom. It was almost like a dream.

Wei Dongheng's sister walked beside her, leading her by the hand with a big smile. The sound of her voice broke the spell. "I had to ask all my friends before I found someone who could call in a favor and get the designer to do a rush order. It looks like my efforts didn't go to waste."

Flushing red, Xie Xue walked up to Xie Qingcheng. "Ge, do you like it?"

He was quiet for a moment. Too many emotions were encompassed within that pause, but in the end he just said, "It's excellent."

Amid the family's joy, Xie Xue didn't even notice Lü Zhishu and He Yu watching them from afar. He Yu was maybe the only one in the room who had no eyes for the new bride, gaze focused only on Xie Qingcheng's profile. He'd once thought that if he tried his hardest, even if they couldn't get married, at least they could be together like an ordinary couple. But these were merely his own delusions. The elder brother standing across from Xie Xue was so worth it, but he would never be his.

Lü Zhishu, meanwhile, fixated on Xie Xue's face. Her innocent, guileless joy, the jubilation of an ordinary girl who was about to marry a man she loved, and the beautiful bespoke wedding dress she wore all sparked an odd kind of jealousy in her. Lü Zhishu was so much older than her, but she still found the girl's good fortune unfair. She hated sights like these…especially this kind of matched couple. As she stared at Xie Qingcheng and Xie Xue from a corner of the room, her thoughts moved in a twisted direction. So angry she began to shake, she heard a ringing in her ears as crooked fantasies played before her eyes—

How disgusting… Whores…the brother and the sister both…

That growing anger nourished the sinful seed embedded in her heart. A plan that had been hovering in the back of her mind for a long time broke the surface of the ground, beginning to take its terrible shape. She knew what she ought to do.

Yes, as long as she succeeded…she could make sure both that shameless Xie Qingcheng and that gold-digger Xie Xue got what they deserved!

Chapter 173:
A Liaison at the Wedding Banquet

IN THE BLINK of an eye, June arrived.

School vacation began, and Wei Dongheng earned his diploma. On a certain day in the middle of the month, the Wei family rented out a high-end vacation home in Hangshi and invited a host of guests to Xie Xue and Wei Dongheng's wedding banquet.

The vacation villa's grounds were extensive, but it was nestled in the scenic district of the city center where every inch of land was worth its weight in gold. The neighboring establishment was an official government guest house—the luxury was easy to imagine. The villa was tastefully furnished without making any ostentatious displays of wealth. Instead, rockeries and waterways wound their way between secluded, meandering pathways and cozy corridors, dotted with elegant buildings constructed in traditional styles. Some parts of the property could only be accessed via boat.

The Wei family had bought out this villa—a space practically the size of a miniature capital—for three days, so their guests could have plenty of time to rest and relax. As the owner of one of the foremost pharmaceutical giants in Huzhou, the He family naturally received an eager invitation. On the day of their arrival, He Yu showed up earlier than Lü Zhishu and He Li, eager to see Xie Qingcheng.

"Welcome, Young Master He. It's our honor." A receptionist was waiting outside when his shuttle arrived.

Guests gathered in small clusters on the lawn, exchanging light conversation. Gossip was human nature, and this was no exception. As He Yu walked across the grass, he overheard two wealthy ladies, clearly close friends, whispering to each other.

"I heard she got pregnant before the wedding."

"Who said that?"

"Pretty much everyone knows. There's no way to keep that sort of thing secret…"

"Say, Third Young Master Wei never seemed like he was in a rush to get married and settle down. Is he only jumping into the firepit so young because he got her pregnant…?"

He Yu already knew that Xie Xue was pregnant. But his primary reaction to the news was, *Why can't Xie Qingcheng be a woman too?*

If he were a woman… They'd had unprotected sex so many times. He would have gotten pregnant with He Yu's child long ago. Then maybe he wouldn't have left him so easily. Why couldn't Xie Qingcheng get pregnant…

His feet took him to the main parlor unbidden, where he spotted Xie Qingcheng standing with the older generations of the Wei family. The sight hit him like a shotgun blast to the heart.

Xie Qingcheng had pushed down all his gloom over his own circumstances for his sister's wedding. He wore a black velvet suit over a rose-quartz-colored silk shirt, hair carefully arranged without a strand out of place, brows and eyes as sharp as if they'd been carved with a blade. His demeanor was steady and aloof, and his face was timelessly handsome.

He Yu stood on the spot for a long time before he gathered himself enough to approach. Following the necessary etiquette as a guest, he first greeted the Wei elders. Then he walked up to Xie Qingcheng, heart pounding in his chest. "Doctor Xie."

"…Hello."

As the family of the bride, no matter how unwilling he was, Xie Qingcheng was still obliged to greet the eldest son of the He family. He extended a hand to He Yu. He Yu took it. One second passed, then two, then three…

Xie Qingcheng let go.

He Yu was treated to a mere three seconds of his warmth. He stared into Xie Qingcheng's eyes. "Congratulations."

"…Thank you."

Between them had once been confessions more fervent than white-hot flame; lustful declarations that clung more than any mist. They held each other and rolled around in bed for an entire day and night, sweat mixing between their intertwined bodies. But now, these bare-bones pleasantries were all that remained. He Yu turned away after one last lingering glance.

He didn't find much opportunity to speak to Xie Qingcheng over the next few days. As Xie Xue's only blood family, there were many places where Xie Qingcheng needed to help out. Auntie Li had come too, but she was getting on in years and didn't understand all the complicated logistics, so he often had to take over.

On the afternoon of the wedding ceremony, the influx of guests reached its peak. He Yu saw many familiar faces. To his surprise, his personal doctor Anthony was there too.

"Young Master He." Anthony was wearing a pale pink suit, carrying a bouquet of flowers and a gift. Crossing paths with He Yu beside the swan pond, he waved at him with a smile.

"Long time no see, Doctor Anthony."

"It's been a long time for sure." Anthony looked him up and down. "Oh, you. You only ever talk to me over WeChat. I feel like I've hardly been earning my salary as your personal doctor."

He Yu smiled but made no comment. He peeked at the gift Anthony was holding, then stepped aside to let him pass. "You're heading to the reception area, right? I won't keep you any longer."

He did wonder who had invited Anthony, as he didn't go greet Xie Qingcheng or the Wei elders, but took his bouquet and gift and headed deeper into the villa—but that was his private business. He Yu had very little interest in anything these days, so he didn't give it much further thought.

A bit later, Chen Man arrived too. When he met He Yu's eyes, both of them stiffened a little. But given the occasion, neither of them said anything.

It was also a little awkward when Chen Man went to greet Xie Qingcheng. Though Chen Man had never dropped the final layer of pretense and confessed his feelings, after that fight at his dormitory the other night, their relationship was no longer what it used to be. As he observed Chen Man's dejected profile from afar, He Yu's schadenfreude was tinged with despondency. He was crazed, while Chen Man was gentle; he had sought Xie Qingcheng's body even before he fell in love, while his rival still hadn't spoken the words "I love you" out loud. But both of Xie Qingcheng's young suitors had reached the same ending. They were both defeated by that wall of ice; both met with utter failure.

"He Yu, so that's where you were. We've been looking for you forever."

He turned, momentarily blinded by the glittering treasures bedazzling some lady's coiffure, before realizing that they belonged to his own mother. Lü Zhishu was leading He Li by the hand—the two of them had only just arrived.

He Li was still afraid of He Yu, even a little guilty. He mumbled out a greeting, then averted his eyes.

"Have you seen the bride?" Lü Zhishu grinned. "She's beautiful, isn't she?"

"I didn't notice."

She trailed off into silence.

"How is Dad doing?"

Some upset showed on his mother's face. "Your dad is resting at home. Maybe it's because of his illness, but he's in a bad mood and he won't respond to anyone… Ah, how can he just shut himself in his room all day? I didn't want to disturb him—people can't stand being disturbed when they're already in a foul mood. I thought I'd let him have some time to cool down."

He Yu nodded—which apparently wasn't enough for He Li.

"That's our own father," he muttered under his breath. "How are you so apathetic…"

If he had taken care of me like he took care of you, I could write 'filial piety' all across my forehead just like you do.

But after glancing at Lü Zhishu and recalling what He Jiwei had told him before, he swallowed those cutting words back down. He Yu merely gave He Li a cold look and he awkwardly shut his mouth under the force of his brother's icy aura.

"This place is beautiful," He Yu said. "You go on ahead. I'll explore a bit more."

Xie Xue and Wei Dongheng had chosen to have a modern wedding, so there weren't too many complicated rituals to get through.

Everyone knew the main event would be the banquet that night, which was set to begin at six. Before then, guests had plenty of spare time to enjoy the picturesque estate.

According to the Wei family's rules, at four o'clock, the groom was to have a one-on-one conversation with the father of the bride. He was to learn from the person who had cared for the bride for the first half of her life, before he could formally marry his beloved in the upcoming ceremony.

Because Xie Xue's father had already passed, Xie Qingcheng was the natural choice to step in. Their meeting place was the villa's Daylily Pavilion—a sequestered courtyard with a pond full of lotuses and koi fish. Xie Qingcheng arrived earlier than Wei Dongheng, so he sat down in the Japanese-style room, drifting with scented smoke, to wait.

Even though the day of the wedding was upon them, he still felt like it was all a dream. He'd never imagined Xie Xue would marry a whelp like Wei Dongheng. Unfortunately, his sister liked the guy, so there was nothing he could do. His decisive nature was useless in the face of his own family's soft entreaties. After all their interactions over the past months, Xie Qingcheng had at least finally managed to remove his tinted goggles. He'd discovered that Wei Dongheng wasn't as much of a degenerate playboy as the rumors said. He was still nowhere near the kind of mature, responsible brother-in-law Xie Qingcheng had envisioned, but he wasn't all that bad either.

Her *was* an idiot, though. The first time they were formally introduced, the bleached blond bowed at the waist and called him "father-in-law" in a nervous blunder. Xie Qingcheng's eyebrow raised on its own at the memory. How absurd. Was he that old already?

After finishing half the pot of tea, Xie Qingcheng checked his watch. Wei Dongheng still hadn't arrived. It wouldn't be unusual if the groom was held up by some task or another, though, so he waited a bit longer.

After a while, he began to feel warm and dizzy. Maybe the incense was too strong, and the air conditioning wasn't on very high. He didn't think too much of it at first, still pondering what he should say. For example, Xie Xue liked mangoes, but she would also feel unwell if she ate too much. She should only be allowed to have half of one at most, and her husband mustn't let her eat as much as she wanted. And also…

At that point, he was nearly done with the pot of tea. But when he went to pour himself another cup, he found his wrist too weak to tip any liquid from the spout. How strange… What was going on? He was so warm… It felt almost like he had heatstroke, and all the strength had drained from his body. This sensation…

Wait! Xie Qingcheng's heart thudded in his chest. This sensation… Why did it feel so much like that time he drank Plum 59 at the club? A shudder ran through his body. His head was already going fuzzy, but he still realized…he'd been caught in a fucking trap!

What had it been? The tea? No, it couldn't be. He'd only just started drinking it, and digestion didn't work that fast. Then… He looked around the room, locking on to the coiling smoke rising from the incense burner. *The incense! There was something wrong with the incense!*

He felt the wrongness overtaking him. A fire blazed through his body. *If Wei Dongheng had been here, then…* His skin grew hot to the touch, but the sweat seeping from his forehead was cold. The heat surged inside him, flames licking at the inside of his throat. Waves and waves of weakness pulsed through him; it was as

if a small yet unstoppable electrical current was running up his spine.

Xie Qingcheng panted for breath, spotting his reflection in the metal details on the decor. His face was flushed crimson, and a vague, sickly desire roiled within his gaze. His peach-blossom eyes betrayed their owner, turning into springtime pools brimming over with thermal tides. Afraid to look any longer, he averted his gaze. He…he got fucking… What was going on… Who did this?!

But his anger only hastened the spread of the poison. A lightning bolt arched through his lower back. He violently shuddered, trembling with aftershocks…

He scarcely dared to imagine what would have happened if Wei Dongheng had shown up on time and the two of them were trapped in here together. When he realized how treacherous this plot was, he smashed a cup against the ground, picked up a shard with trembling fingers, and stabbed the sharp edge into his own arm. He let out a quiet groan of pain, but just about managed to maintain his sanity.

Gripping the table for support, he used this moment of clarity to push his weak, aching body upright and stagger to the door. As soon as his fingertips touched the handle, the door suddenly opened on its own. Startled, Xie Qingcheng yanked his head upward, but his eyesight was already too blurry to identify the newcomer. All his other senses were amplified, however. In his stupor, he smelled a masculine scent and his apprehension sharply spiked, but the effect of the drug was already racking his body again.

As his eyesight blurred even further, his legs went weak and he toppled forward, collapsing onto the person who had just walked into the room.

“Xie-ge?” The person started, Xie Qingcheng’s flushed face and unfocused eyes reflecting in his pupils. “Xie-ge, what’s wrong? You…”

This incense was far stronger than Plum 59, and its effects were brutal. Xie Qingcheng’s head was spinning, and panic was written across his face. His throat bobbed; his eyelashes trembled. Powerful instincts fueled him to try and push that man away, but he didn’t have an ounce of strength in his arms.

“Get out…” He managed to assemble a few words in a damp and hoarse voice. “Don’t…come in here…”

The man wrapped his arms around Xie Qingcheng. When he smelled that hot-blooded, masculine scent, his body fell victim to the stimulation, and he let out a low gasp.

“Don’t come in here. Get out… Leave this place… St-stay away from me…”

Maybe the heavy incense had already attacked this newcomer too, as before Xie Qingcheng lost his mind entirely, he felt that person’s heart beating faster and faster, and then—

The man shoved Xie Qingcheng into the Daylily Pavilion. The world spun around him and his ears rang as the sliding door slammed shut, sinking the room into a darkness thick with lust.

It was six on the dot, and the wedding banquet had begun.

“Where’s the groom?”

“He’s not here yet, but the couple’s supposed to be walking down the aisle in half an hour. What’s going on…?”

Wei Dongheng's second eldest brother made another call, but no one picked up the line.

Sitting at her table, Lü Zhishu watched as the Wei family began to fall into disorder. Everything was proceeding according to her expectations.

The Wei family were progressive in some ways, but highly traditional in others. In the past their marriages had mostly been strategic matches with other clans. Thirty or forty years ago, it was almost unthinkable that a love match like Wei Dongheng's would have been permitted. But one day, one of the Wei family's daughters fled from the altar, leading to a huge scandal. They hired a Daoist priest to calculate the location most advantageous to their clan, which was this exact villa.

They eventually dropped their superstitious beliefs, but they kept the tradition of holding their weddings in this place. Without fail, they would rent the entire estate, and a parent of the bride would have a private conversation with the groom so the bride wouldn't feel so nervous stepping into this new chapter of her life.

Lü Zhishu knew that this discussion was always held in the Daylily Pavilion located at the far end of the vacation villa. They would burn incense, brew a cup of tea, and have a conversation, and then the groom would leave for the hotel's main parlor to marry his new bride. She timed things perfectly, waiting until the Wei family could no longer hide their panic before standing up and acting the part of the well-intentioned bystander.

"What's going on? Did something go wrong? Do you need any help?"

The He and Wei families conducted numerous business deals with each other, and Lü Zhishu was involved enough to be invited to the year-in-review meetings of the Wei family's companies. Multiple women of the family thought she was a kind person and felt a sense of kinship with her, not to mention the fact that they'd worked together regularly for a long time. Who would ever imagine she would plot against them?

"The ceremony is supposed to start, but Dongheng's disappeared," said the woman from the Wei family who got along with Lü Zhishu best. "He's not picking up his phone… That child, what's wrong with him?"

Lü Zhishu immediately put on a well-rehearsed mask of anxiety. "Aiya, that really is a problem. Why don't I help you look for him?"

"His erge went to the Daylily Pavilion with a few other people. We were wondering if he got too wrapped up in the conversation he was having with the brother of the bride and forgot the time." The woman shifted on her feet in unease. "Ah, that shouldn't be it. How could the brother and husband both forget something so important?"

Lü Zhishu hurried to reassure her. "Don't panic. Let's go check on them too. If something is going on, maybe more hands will be helpful."

The Wei aunt only wanted the best for everyone, so in her worry for Wei Dongheng, she readily agreed to the suggestion to head to the Daylily Pavilion.

Hoping to amplify the embarrassing scandal to the utmost, Lü Zhishu intentionally made a big deal of their departure and pulled along a few more women she knew. They wound through a maze of waterside pavilions, but once they arrived at the Daylily Pavilion, they saw the second Wei brother and a few of his companions immobilized outside the door. Their faces looked faintly green.

"What is it? What's going on?"

One of the family bodyguards stepped forward and politely blocked their path. "Madams, my apologies. There's a situation inside that we need to deal with…"

The faintest hint of a smirk appeared at the corner of Lü Zhishu's mouth. A situation? She knew exactly what kind of situation was happening inside.

She had used a small amount of obedience potion to make the housekeeper in charge of setting up this private room unknowingly swap the property's usual incense for a special formulation that wasn't available anywhere on the market. One of Duan Wen's chemists had refined an ordinary aphrodisiac fragrance by adding a certain amount of an inhalant hallucinogen to create a concentrated effect. If a person breathed in a large amount of this incense in a short period of time, they would lose all control of themselves. Aside from sexual intercourse, there was no other way to break its effect… And this vicious shrew had put that incense in the room where Wei Dongheng and Xie Qingcheng were to hold their conversation.

Now she could tell from the Wei family's reaction that her manipulations had their intended effect. The women she brought with her included a few prolific gossips, and once the scandal got out, not only would Xie Xue never be able to marry Wei Dongheng, but He Yu would never look at Xie Qingcheng again. Who would be interested in a man who got caught fucking his future brother-in-law on the day of the wedding? She maintained her composure while she internally sneered, waiting for the scandal to explode.

"Did something happen to Dongheng?"

"What's going on…?"

Wearing looks of embarrassment, the bodyguards were about to explain when a hoarse groan came from inside the bamboo-walled room. The bodyguards could stop people from crossing their line, but they couldn't block off the sounds. The chattering ladies immediately fell silent, and some of the quicker ones were already covering their mouths in shock.

The voices were clearly those of two men.

And the sounds they were making made it obvious what absurd, taboo things were going on inside.

Shoving down the wild joy she felt at her malicious plan coming to fruition, keeping her eyebrows from arching into a grin, Lü Zhishu put a hand over her mouth to affect a scandalized expression. "Aiya, this…this…"

Green-faced, Wei Dongheng's brother didn't go to push open the door, but walked back toward the women who had come to check on the situation. He forced a smile onto his face. "There was a misunderstanding; it's two of our guests in there. Please head back."

He couldn't even summon a more believable excuse. He swept sharp eyes to the side and said to a bodyguard, "Take the madams to another room so they can recover. I'll head over after I handle the situation here."

The women all knew this would be the Wei family's biggest scandal in decades, and their second son would hardly let this go, nor permit them to breathe a word about it. He must be running through countless cleanup plans in his head, but… How the hell were you supposed to do cleanup for something like this? And

who could actually resist spilling the details? Lü Zhishu kept the same expression on her face as all the other women, not saying a word but dragging her feet as the bodyguards tried to corral them away. On the inside, she wanted nothing more than for Xie Qingcheng and Wei Dongheng to make even more of a fuss.

She got her wish—as she turned around, she saw another group of people searching for the groom walking toward them from the other end of the corridor.

Wei-erge's face grew even darker. He whispered a few instructions to his bodyguards to shut down the entire Daylily Pavilion and make sure no one else got inside. But when that group of people approached, he found that his own father was one of them.

"What's going on?" his father whispered to him, forehead creased in a frown. The Wei father always worried about Wei Dongheng. Now his son had mysteriously disappeared on the day of his wedding—he wasn't optimistic.

Wei Dongheng's brother had no idea what he could say to his father in front of all these people. As more and more of them showed up, despite all his experience in high-pressure situations, he began to lose his grip. Sweat rolled down his forehead. Seeing the strange expressions on everyone's faces and his second son's silence, the Wei father waved the bodyguards aside and strode toward the Daylily Pavilion's tightly shut door himself.

Overjoyed, Lü Zhishu counted down the seconds until the door would yawn open to reveal the scandal to the world.

Another low groan came from inside the room. The low, misty voice belonged to a man, but it was so exceptionally alluring that for a moment everyone on the scene found themselves bewitched.

The Wei father went stiff, immediately realizing what was going on inside. His hand paused on the door handle, creased face cycling between flushed and pale. He opened his mouth to speak, when the man in the pavilion was finally pushed to his breaking point.

"…Stop it…" A few seconds later, his broken voice called out another person's name. "He…He Yu…"

Lü Zhishu felt like she'd been struck by lightning. She stood frozen to the spot, eyes wide, while all the shocked and pitying gazes directed toward the Wei father and son swiveled in her direction.

She could scarcely believe it. Unlike the two Wei men, who had been too afraid to peek, she screeched and charged to the entrance to the Daylily Pavilion, yanking open the door they had been protecting this whole time.

What she saw left her absolutely stupefied. Lü Zhishu staggered backward, her face ashen and her entire body trembling in shock, before falling onto her rear. The rays of the evening sun slanted through the half-open bamboo door to illuminate He Yu and Xie Qingcheng's bodies, half enveloped in smoke inside the dim Daylily Pavilion…

Chapter 174:
Confessing to Mrs. Lü

THE TRUE SITUATION inside the Daylily Pavilion was exposed, to everyone's utter shock. The wealthy ladies and gentlemen scarcely knew what to say.

A saccharine scent floated through the air, and deep within the perfumed smoke, He Yu, the freshly-turned-twenty young master of the He family, was intertwined with his former personal doctor Xie Qingcheng.

Everyone who knew Xie Qingcheng, with his handsome visage, steady demeanor, and keen personality, thought you could scarcely meet a more traditional, masculine man. Anyone would feel safe in his company. But now, this man was sprawled out across the tatami mats, brows furrowed in ecstasy, so enthralled that none of the guests could look away. How could this be the same Xie Qingcheng?

The guests were all frozen to the spot, but He Yu reacted right away. Although his head was a bit fuzzy from the drug, his desire to protect Xie Qingcheng was strong enough to drag his rationality back to the surface. He shot to his feet and slammed the door to the Daylily Pavilion closed. The quiet sounds of him comforting Xie Qingcheng came from beyond the bamboo barrier.

Dead silence reigned outside, before realization exploded through everyone's heads—holy shit, no wonder Xie Qingcheng had held his position as the He family's personal doctor for so long!

When it came to sordid gossip, human imagination was limitless. Within the space of a few seconds, the crowd of onlookers had connected every possible pair of dots. After all, this was a high society affair. Any sort of relationship was possible. Unfortunately, not a single person considered the possibility that the incense was drugged. The members of the Wei family let out surreptitious sighs of relief, and Wei Dongheng's brother wiped the sweat from his forehead with the end of his sleeve. Thank goodness it wasn't Wei Dongheng and Xie Qingcheng… This mess no longer had much to do with the Wei family. But the He family…

He slanted a glance at Lü Zhishu.

Seeing her stormy face, he waved a hand to start corralling people away. "I said it was a pair of guests… Move along, move along. I'll request everyone not to speak of this…"

He ordered the bodyguards to do a bit of cleanup, then headed back to help Lü Zhishu up from the ground. "Mrs. Lü, catch your breath. I'll take you to the next building. Your son is an adult, after all… There's nothing anyone can do…"

The Wei father had also recovered, letting out a light cough. "Mrs. Lü, we'll figure out how to handle the situation. A lot of people saw, but we'll speak with each of them. We won't leave your family in an awkward situation."

Tears streamed from her rage-filled eyes, and her plump lips trembled, unable to speak a word. *How could this be?* She had timed everything perfectly, and her plan should have been flawless—according to the Wei family's rules, shouldn't it have been Wei Dongheng coming to the Daylily Pavilion to speak to Xie

Qingcheng? Why would He Yu be in there?

Some time later, the sounds inside the room finally came to a stop. Xie Qingcheng sprawled across the tatami mats, the bare skin of his back still striped with the imprints of the bamboo strips. His eyes were empty behind their foggy haze, and there was no expression on his face. He Yu held him, trying to comfort him as he laid kisses across his eyelids and forehead.

"Ge…it's all right, I'm here…"

Although Xie Qingcheng's senses had still been dulled by the drug when everyone saw them, he still knew they had been found out. He understood he had been thoroughly plotted against. The incense had burned out, and his body was still damp with sticky sweat as he lay on the bamboo floor, but his head was quickly clearing. At this point, his own dignity was no longer the most important thing.

"He Yu," he said in a toneless voice. "Wei Dongheng was supposed to be the other person in this room."

He Yu gave no response.

Without a single ripple of emotion, he continued, "Do you understand what that means?"

How could He Yu not understand? After he'd arrived in the villa, his eyes never left Xie Qingcheng for a second whenever he was in his vicinity. That was why he noticed him going to the Daylily Pavilion alone, and how long he stayed there while Wei Dongheng failed to appear. All the dangerous situations they had survived together had honed He Yu's senses, and he realized that something was off. That was why he'd entered the Daylily Pavilion himself.

And as soon as he did, Xie Qingcheng had stumbled right into his arms. Fully under the effects of the drug by then, burning hot and clearly in terrible pain, he needed someone's help. It was unquestionable that someone had drugged him.

And what a vicious attack it was. The mastermind wanted everyone to see Xie Qingcheng and Wei Dongheng doing those things together! He Yu held him even tighter, humming his assent into the side of his neck. "I know," he said. "I'll protect you. Don't be afraid…Xie Qingcheng…"

Xie Qingcheng cared so much about his image as an upright, masculine man, but so many guests, men and women alike, had seen him just now. He Yu was afraid he'd be unable to bear it…so afraid that the fingers he carded through his hair began to tremble.

They lay there for a long time in that silent bamboo room, before Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes. "You should go," he said. "Go explain everything to your mother. If she's angry, push everything onto me. I'll talk to her."

"Xie Qingcheng…"

The temperature inside the room had cooled. The aftermath of the incident, and everything that must be hiding behind the scenes, were enough to make anyone shiver in trepidation.

He Yu didn't leave. He slowly closed up Xie Qingcheng's silk shirt, button by button, twin rows of thick lashes lowered over his eyes. He kept them utterly still, as if by resisting the urge to move his eyelids, he could keep the tears welling up behind them from falling.

A faint trace of blood stained the corner Xie Qingcheng's mouth as he bit his lip. "You should go," he said again. He looked exhausted. "Let me have a moment to myself…"

He Yu stayed in the room with him a while longer, but Xie Qingcheng insisted that he leave. In the end, he had no choice but to go.

Outside the bamboo room, he saw one of the Wei bodyguards waiting quietly in the corridor. "Mr. He, your mother is waiting in the room over there."

"…Understood."

All the onlookers had been cleared out from the area surrounding the Daylily Pavilion. The Wei family had a big mess to clean up and couldn't stay, so they only left a few bodyguards and a housekeeper behind. When He Yu opened the door to the neighboring building, he saw Lü Zhishu sitting by the window with tears streaming down her face.

"…Do you know what you've done to our family?" Seeing him walk inside, she sobbed and looked in his direction. "He Yu… Why…why would you be there?!"

He slid the door closed and sat down across from her.

"Mom…"

She wiped her tears. "Something's not right about all this. Were you bewitched? Did you drink something you shouldn't have?"

Her furious tears were real, but the helpless panic she let slip into her questions was fake—obviously, she had orchestrated the drugging herself. But she could keep up the façade, at least to this extent, around He Yu. Duan Wen wanted him to be fully devoted to her. Even if she wasn't able to ruin his image of Xie Qingcheng, she could at least protect his image of her.

"Tell me, He Yu," she said through sobs, "were you framed? Mom will clear your name, but our family can't afford the shame…"

"Mom," he said. "I wasn't. I like him for real."

The room was pin-drop silent. Lü Zhishu stared at him, so shocked she even forgot to sob. She nearly thought she had misheard.

"I like Xie Qingcheng. This isn't the first time I've been with him like this." At this point, He Yu had nothing more to hide. He spoke slowly, but very clearly. "Today was an accident. I never wanted to embarrass the family like this, but I truly do love him." A pause. Then he added, "I've loved him for a long time."

Her face gave a comical twitch. "He… That shameless… He's a personal doctor with no professional ethics. He's seduced his own client's son—"

"I wanted him first." Her son's voice was quiet, but resolute. He didn't push off any of the responsibility. "I forced him to be with me first."

She was dumbstruck.

"If one of us has no ethics," he said, "it's me, not him."

"You… What on earth are you saying?! He's a man, He Yu! He's a divorced man. You've gone mad… You've lost it…" Lü Zhishu's anxiety grew and grew. She never thought He Yu would up and admit it to her face. What should she do now?

She couldn't lash out at him too much, lest the conflict reach a point where they could no longer resolve it. But she couldn't just allow him to stay in love with Xie Qingcheng, either, or else she'd never separate them. In her panicked roller coaster of emotions, she clutched her chest, unable to breathe.

Hu Yu returned to his senses. He didn't want to push her too far. He stepped up and patted her on the back, but his face was resolute. "Mom, I've never asked you for much, but I'm begging you now—just let it be, okay?"

"That's absurd! You think I can just let it be? He Yu! So many people saw! Even if the Wei family speaks to each of them, even if they make them sign an NDA, what use would it be? When you were with him in that room, he looked like…like…" Out of consideration for He Yu's feelings, she chose to watch her words and didn't call him "the cheapest kind of male prostitute" out loud. "How can I let it be?!" she sobbed.

He said nothing.

"Don't you realize, now that your affair with him is exposed, you've ruined your reputation *and* the He family's reputation? You can't tell anyone else you like him, or that you forced him. Think about your father. Think about me. Think about the entire family…okay?!"

"What about him?" protested He Yu. "So many people saw us today. If I don't explain, how are people going to talk about him in the future?"

Lü Zhishu was distraught and furious. "You… Do you value him more than your own family?"

There was a long silence. "Mom," He Yu said at last, "I know you suffered a lot while you were pregnant with me."

She shuddered.

"I don't want to carry on resenting you, and I've been trying my best to be closer with all of you…but I can't pretend that I didn't spend the past twenty years of my life without once experiencing familial warmth. To me, the family you speak of is just a big, empty house, with no one to keep me company."

"He Yu…"

"Xie Qingcheng was the one who spent the most time with me all these years." He lowered his eyes. "Did you notice?"

There was nothing she could say.

"He's already lost everything. I can't let him be the target of everyone's gossip. I was the one at fault, and if anyone asks whether Xie Qingcheng seduced me, I'll tell them no, I was the one who liked him first. I was the one who insisted on having him."

Lü Zhishu's insides burned with fury. She was disappointed to the core. Even her teeth chattered in rage—the way He Yu expressed his sincere affections toward Xie Qingcheng was like something out of an ancient poem. With the mission Boss Duan had given her, she could only fret. She had no way of understanding how He Yu could be so stubborn.

In her rage, she momentarily lost control and raised her hand to slap him across the face. But before she could move to actually hit him, the door to their private room slid loudly open.

Xie Qingcheng stood in the entryway. The man who had moments ago been lying there with his shirt falling off his shoulders stood upright and cold as ever, backlit by the setting sun. His sudden appearance brought Lü Zhishu back to her senses, and her hand stayed where it was.

"Mrs. Lü." Xie Qingcheng's gaze paused on her raised palm before he walked into the room and said, "Don't worry. He Yu won't have to be asked why he chose to be with me."

Step by step he strode into the room. Even though he'd just been fucked, even though red marks still dotted his lips and neck, his force of personality was still overwhelming. When he stared into a person's eyes, they could read a heavy strength in his gaze. He walked past He Yu and stopped in front of Lü Zhishu, pausing for a moment before moving between them. Even if her hand fell, the slap wouldn't land on He Yu's face.

He looked down at her. "Your son and I won't have any unnecessary contact in the future. I never really felt anything for him in the first place."

He Yu stared at him, eyes wide with an animalistic hurt.

"I apologize for the trouble I've caused you today," Xie Qingcheng said. "Someone set a trap, and I need to figure out exactly what happened so we can all have a proper explanation."

His hair was still mussed, and the pain and weakness in his body had made his fair skin even more translucent, like a layer of ice. But he had already cleared any trace of fragility from his peach-blossom eyes. Every ordinary emotion was hidden.

His pride and composure only enraged Lü Zhishu further. Professional and personal grudges both surged inside her as she summoned up every ounce of her strength to land a resounding, full-power slap across his face.

"Xie-ge!"

Her eyes bulged. She still hadn't had enough. "You whore!"

Xie Qingcheng didn't look at He Yu. He raised a hand to block him from stepping forward, his gaze fixed on Lü Zhishu through the scattered curtain of his hair. His cheek was turning red, and he could taste blood at the corner of his mouth. He closed his eyes, accepting the insult.

In her utter fury, Lü Zhishu lost all restraint. "Do you have any shame?! Someone tried to set a 'trap'? Don't you know that shamelessness is written all over your face? Xie Qingcheng! You're as brazen as can be! My husband offered you a learning opportunity, and you took your clothes off and seduced my son! You slut!"

"He's not! Mom, if you're going to cuss someone out, do it to me, okay?!" He Yu interrupted her, trying to look at Xie Qingcheng's face again. Xie Qingcheng shoved his hand away.

"Mrs. Lü, say whatever you want. This was entirely my fault for getting him involved."

"'Getting him involved'? You've ruined him! You've ruined our family! Twelve years ago… If I knew you were this kind of whore the first time you came to our home twelve years ago, I would never have let you become our personal doctor! What have you even treated? You've treated yourself right into his bed! You… Get out! Get out right now!"

He closed his eyes. He hadn't wanted to spend so long speaking to Lü Zhishu, but when she brought up the reason this had all started, he felt his own surge of anger.

"Twelve years ago, I first came to your estate to discuss your son's condition. But you were too busy with work, and I waited a long, long time for you, until the tea I was served went cold. You didn't seem to care a whit about him. That was why I eventually chose to stay and treat him from the estate. That was the direct reason. Mrs. Lü, you don't need to worry. From today onward, I'll treat him exactly the way I did that day, as no more than an ordinary patient. But I hope"—he paused, staring back at her face—"that you will think a bit more clearly, Mrs. Lü, and not turn back into the woman I met twelve years ago. Or else I really will have to pity your son."

Xie Qingcheng was much taller and stronger than Lü Zhishu, but he didn't fight back. After he finished speaking, he turned and walked out without another word.

He didn't look at He Yu even once.

Chapter 175:
One More Confession

EVEN WITH the wedding banquet ongoing, the Wei family still called the police to lead an investigation into the incident. The housekeeper who had lit the incense was quickly identified, but no matter what they asked, her only response was, "I don't know."

She truly had no idea. Lü Zhishu had used a small amount of obedience potion to confuse her senses, and she'd had no free will while she was switching out the incense. Given her failure to cooperate, the police took her away and prepared to proceed with the investigation.

Though the results had yet to come out, Xie Qingcheng could pretty much guess what they would be. The housekeeper's confusion during the initial interrogation wasn't faked, and he had seen similar methods before, perpetrators using drugs to make innocent people do their dirty work. Hadn't the same tactics been used when they sent a mentally ill person to try and burn the police station, steal a video camera from evidence, and kidnap a witness? This incident must have had something to do with Duan Wen's organization. But…

He pressed a hand to his forehead, rubbing his temples with ice-cold fingertips. He thought, near-mechanically—*Why would that organization want to ruin Wei Dongheng and Xie Xue's wedding, and try and make me sleep with Wei Dongheng?*

The wedding banquet was long over, and the guests had scattered. Most of them still didn't know what had happened in the Daylily Pavilion, but he knew that the news would soon spread among them like a virus. He didn't have the spare energy to worry about all that.

Whether they wanted to accuse him of being a male prostitute or of seducing his own patient, they could say what they wanted. When two people with an age difference got involved with each other, outsiders would always think it was the elder who'd approached the younger with ulterior motives. To them, a well-educated young master would never become interested in his older personal doctor of his own free will. With a little nudging, they would all begin to say that Xie Qingcheng had used these abnormal methods to groom his client's naive son for money. The He clan's talented young scion was obviously being fooled.

That would be best for He Yu. He was actually innocent this time.

"In order to protect the privacy of its guests, the villa's surveillance system has many blind corners. Some cameras were also broken." After the banquet, Wei Dongheng's brother came to Xie Qingcheng's room. "The police subpoenaed all the camera feeds, but they haven't been able to find footage of that housekeeper having contact with any suspicious persons."

After receiving a physical examination, Xie Qingcheng sat numbly in an armchair, listening with a blank look on his face as Wei-erge explained.

"It's strange," he said. "Someone did change the incense in the Daylily Pavilion to an aphrodisiac drug. If they had succeeded, the wedding would have been a bust. My family would have lost face entirely, and you and Xie Xue would

never be able to look these Huzhou elites in the eye again… But for some reason, thanks to Lao-san's absence, it ended up being you and He Yu." He paused, then continued, "I don't think this is a coincidence."

"Where did you end up finding Wei Dongheng?"

"In the bathroom of his own room," his brother said. "He said he wanted to freshen up and take a shower before he met you for the pre-wedding talk, but somehow he ended up falling asleep. We found traces of a sedative in his water."

Long eyelashes draped over his eyes, Xie Qingcheng sat still and unmoving. "Wei Dongheng was spared in all this because he unknowingly drank drugged water. It looks like the person who drugged him and the person behind the aphrodisiac weren't the same."

Wei Dongheng's brother hummed in agreement. "And, the person who drugged Dongheng knew exactly what the person who planted the aphrodisiac was trying to do. What I want to know is, since they knew, why didn't they just stop the plot entirely?"

Xie Qingcheng finally looked up at the other man. "Maybe that person only wanted to protect Wei Dongheng."

"…Why are you looking at me? I didn't do it. If I knew, could I let my new sister-in-law's brother be treated like that?"

But Xie Qingcheng couldn't be entirely confident in his words—it looked like there were indeed two masterminds locking horns behind the scenes. One wanted to hurt the Wei family and the Xie siblings. Even deeper in the shadows, the other was watching it all. That person had clearly had the opportunity to stop the entire incident in its tracks, but chose to protect only Wei Dongheng with the sedative. Given those circumstances, what normal person wouldn't suspect a member of the Wei family?

Sighing, Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes. "What about the cameras around Wei Dongheng's room? No leads there either?"

Wei-erge shook his head.

That was to be expected. If the person who set the aphrodisiac could pull it off without a trace, it would have been unbelievable if the one who set the sedative, clearly the more skilled party, had left any evidence behind.

"Either way, we'll keep investigating," Wei-erge said. "As for the other guests, we can't divulge the truth about how you and He Yu were drugged just yet. It wasn't actually that many people who personally witnessed what was going on. If we try to make a statement now, it will just attract the attention of everyone who didn't know or didn't believe it in the first place, and it'll only make the rumors worse. Do you agree that this is an appropriate way to handle the situation?"

Xie Qingcheng thought it over. "Fine." Then he asked, "What about Xie Xue?"

"She doesn't know yet."

The wedding ceremony had been delayed for over half an hour because of the incident, but fortunately, Wei Dongheng had been discovered and woken in time. After his personal issues were dealt with, Xie Qingcheng had been able to walk his sister down the aisle and hand her over to her new husband. During the whole process, none of the people who had been at the Daylily Pavilion had acted at all

strangely—facing the outside world with a veneer of normalcy was a skill these elites had all mastered. And so by the end of the wedding banquet, Xie Xue still didn't know what had happened to her brother.

"We talked to Dongheng, and he didn't tell Xie Xue," his brother said. "But to tell the truth, knowing him, he won't be able to keep a lid on it for long. Xie Xue will find out sooner or later."

Xie Qingcheng nodded with a soft sigh. "There's nothing we can do about it. That works for now; let's just try to keep it from her as long as we can."

That was about the end of their conversation.

Wei Dongheng's brother knew that Xie Qingcheng had suffered today, having had to force himself to keep a straight face through the entire wedding banquet. He had to be exhausted.

"I'll head out," said Wei-erge. "There's some more cleanup work I need to do. Get some rest."

He dimmed the lights in the room and took a final glance back, but tactfully didn't stare. Before today, whenever he'd spoken to his new sister-in-law's brother, he never considered him an object of sexual attraction. However, those sights and sounds from the Daylily Pavilion had been just too captivating. When the door slid open and he laid eyes on the alluring scene inside, it would be a lie to say he wasn't shocked. Especially with the way Xie Qingcheng lay across the bamboo mats, his fair neck and dark, furrowed brows exposed to the world… Wei-erge might not have been gay, but he'd still been shaken by the sight.

His brother's new wife Xie Xue was beautiful and charming. But the truly bewitching one was her elder brother. No wonder He Yu had fallen entirely under his spell… Hmm. He couldn't exactly blame the boy for being too impulsive…

Thoughts sliding in an improper direction, Wei-erge prepared to leave, but as soon as he opened the door, he saw another young master standing outside, eyes bloodshot, a distraught look on his face.

"Hm? Chen Man?"

Inside the room, Xie Qingcheng stiffened a little on hearing that name. His senses had been dulled, and while He Yu had been clear to him across the negligible distance between them, everything else had been as hazy as if he was looking at it through a layer of mist. He Yu had quickly closed the door, besides, and all those guests had been sent away, so Xie Qingcheng didn't know exactly who had seen the two of them.

But Wei Dongheng's brother knew. Chen Man had also been there. He was basically the Wei father's godson, so he had arrived with that group. He was worried when he heard the whispers that the groom was still speaking to the brother of the bride and hadn't shown up at the banquet, so he headed over with the Wei family's relatives and friends to look for them in the Daylily Pavilion. After all was said and done, he'd been practically catatonic as the family had ushered him away.

After the banquet, he couldn't resist it anymore; he headed to Xie Qingcheng's room to look for him. Now he found himself face-to-face with the Wei family's second son.

"Do you have some business here?" Wei-erge asked.

"My… How is Xie-ge?"

Wei Dongheng's brother raised an eyebrow. He didn't know that Chen Man and Xie Qingcheng had a close relationship.

Before he could reply, Xie Qingcheng spoke up from further inside the room. "Let him in."

Wei-erge couldn't really protest. He turned aside and let Chen Man enter.

Xie Qingcheng was still sitting in a chair beside the window. Chen Man saw him sinking into the plush crimson cushions, his face in profile. He had lost a lot of weight lately, and the air conditioning was set low, so he was draped in a velvet blanket. The rise and fall of his chest was barely visible beneath it.

Xie Qingcheng figured that no matter what else happened that night, it couldn't possibly make his mood any worse. When something couldn't be avoided, it was better to face it head-on. He allowed Chen Man to enter so they could settle this rotten mess today. But he was so tired he didn't even notice when Chen Man locked the door behind him.

Chen Man stood in the entryway, looking at Xie Qingcheng's silhouette backed by the night sky outside the window. "Xie-ge," he said quietly, his voice as hoarse as sandpaper.

From the chair, Xie Qingcheng lifted his head. "This afternoon…were you at the Daylily Pavilion too?"

"Mm." Chen Man hummed in assent, walking over to him. His demeanor was very different from the usual, but unfortunately, Xie Qingcheng didn't notice through his utter exhaustion.

Though Chen Man already knew Xie Qingcheng's relationship with He Yu wasn't innocent, seeing it with his own eyes must have still been a shock. Since he was here, there must be something he felt he had to say to him.

Xie Qingcheng coughed. "He Yu and I…"

"Ge, you don't love him, right?" Chen Man interrupted him before he could finish.

Xie Qingcheng said nothing.

"I know you don't love him. You're not a homosexual; you don't like men. He was the one who forced you. I could tell that day at your dorm." As he spoke, he got more and more agitated. He suddenly looked up and stared into Xie Qingcheng's eyes. There was a determination to transgress there that was unlike Chen Man. "Xie-ge, did he use his position to force you to be with him? Tell me—I can help you. I can talk to my grandfather. As long as you're willing, I can put you into protection. I can take care of you; you don't need to ever see him again. He'll never…he'll never be able to do something so preposterous again!"

"Chen Man, calm down…"

"He embarrassed you in front of so many people!" There was no way he could calm down. The domineering nature of a politician's descendant was finally emerging from his humble shell.

How could he bear it? He was mild tempered and gentle, but no matter how mild mannered a person was, seeing his untouchable idol submitting to another man with his very own eyes was unbearable. And in front of so many people at that! Flaming with violent emotion, Chen Man barely looked like himself.

“I’ll take you away from here,” he insisted. “Xie-ge, I’ll take you to Yanzhou, to my grandfather’s territory. No matter what kind of talents He Yu has, he’ll never be able to find you… He’ll never be able to humiliate you again… He’ll never be able to force you… I’ll take you away. I’ll take you away this very moment.” More and more agitated by the minute, he stepped forward and grabbed Xie Qingcheng’s wrist.

Xie Qingcheng shook him off, finally raising his voice. “Chen Man! Calm down!”

But the moment Xie Qingcheng pushed him away, Chen Man covered his own eyes—he was crying.

“How could he treat you like that… I was the one who knew you first… Xie-ge… I was the one who knew you first!”

“What the hell are you saying…?” Xie Qingcheng was utterly confused. He thought Chen Man had come here to express his disappointment, but instead he was displaying some heavier, more repressed sentiment.

Chen Man continued to sob, until Xie Qingcheng said, “You misunderstood. This time, he didn’t force me to do anything.”

Chen Man slowly lowered his arm. His heart was already twisted up in agony, and when he heard those words, an icy chill crawled up his arms and legs. “He…didn’t force you?”

“He didn’t.”

“Then you…then you…”

Not wanting to get Chen Man too involved in all this, Xie Qingcheng didn’t say a word about how they had been drugged. “I know what you saw made you very disappointed in me,” he said. “But I have no way to explain it to you.”

A silence.

“Chen Man, you and He Yu are both well-known in these circles in Huzhou. Your families can’t simply avoid each other. I hope you won’t clash with him in any way.”

If Xie Qingcheng’s eyesight had been a bit better, he would have noticed the way Chen Man’s face paled until he looked almost like a corpse, the emotion in his eyes veering on the edge of collapse. Unfortunately, he didn’t see a thing.

“In fact, that time you met He Yu at the school, I wanted to say something to you… If the fact that I did something like that with someone about your age makes you uncomfortable, or even disgusted…I understand. I know that was never the impression you had of me. I won’t argue, even if you think I tricked you.”

It felt as if something was lodged in Chen Man’s throat. “Xie-ge… I don’t understand… You were so good to Ruoqiu-jie before. I thought…I thought you only liked women…”

Xie Qingcheng said nothing.

“But if you also like men…why him?” Chen Man grabbed his wrist again, tears rolling down his face and dripping onto the back of Xie Qingcheng’s hand. “Why him?!”

A twenty-year-old boy.

A twenty-year-old boy had defiled the elder brother whom he'd admired for so long, but whom he couldn't even confess to for fear of befouling him. While he respected Xie Qingcheng in every way, those eyes had misted over in bed with a boy even younger than himself, tears welling at their corners. His Xie-ge…

That was his Xie-ge!

Hatred, sorrow, and jealousy overtook Chen Man. Like a flow of lava, the emotions burned away at his once-pure heart. He tried to keep himself under control, using the last of his rationality to force himself not to step over the line.

Until he saw the smear of blood on Xie Qingcheng's lips.

It was a trace left behind after He Yu had kissed him. Staring at it from such a short distance away, Chen Man felt as if his heart was being rent by knives. His ears buzzed, and the scene he saw in the Daylily Pavilion flashed before his eyes. He could almost hear those broken sounds that escaped from Xie Qingcheng's throat despite his efforts to suppress them, echoing from that little Japanese-style room. Pushed to his limits, he had called He Yu's name…

He had called He Yu's name!

Chen Man's last wisp of rationality was swallowed up entirely. The feelings he had suppressed for over a decade ripped through his facade and surged to the surface, breaking through the dam he had built up inside his heart. He grabbed Xie Qingcheng's weakened hand, yanked the unguarded man up from the chair, and shoved him down onto the bed. And then he kissed Xie Qingcheng on the lips.

Xie Qingcheng's eyes shot open.

He felt as if a string had snapped inside his head.

Chapter 176:
An Encounter Between Love Rivals

CHEN MAN had lost his mind—or, perhaps, he was finally acting on his true intentions.

He loved Xie Qingcheng so much. He had loved him in silence for so many years, all because he thought he was straight and would never fall in love with a man. But he wasn't like that at all… Xie Qingcheng had lied to him. His aloofness was fake; he could accept being with a man…

Even being with a much younger boy!

Xie Qingcheng finally recovered from his all-encompassing shock. Chen Man doing something like this shocked him even more than those first vengeful actions He Yu had taken. Because…because he trusted Chen Man so much. Ever since he was young, Chen Man had never disappointed him. But now, he—!

He felt as if he'd fallen into a pit of ice. He struggled to get up, turning his face away. "Chen Man! Have you gone mad?! What are you doing?! Chen Yan! Let go of me!"

He was still wearing the rose-quartz-colored silk shirt from the wedding banquet. It was rumpled, some of its buttons popped open, and the marks He Yu had left stood out glaringly on his neck… Those dark red blotches were a violent trigger to Chen Man's already chaotic mental state. When he heard Xie Qingcheng call him Chen Yan, he became even more furious and distraught—every single thing he would never have said under ordinary circumstances was forced from his throat.

"Why?" he near-sobbed. "Why can it be him, but not me?"

"Let go! Chen Yan, you've lost it!"

"I only wish I'd lost it earlier!" he yelled. "Why would you be with him? I thought he forced you! I thought you hated him! But you say that's not true… Why? Is it because He Yu's rich? Because of his status?"

The effects of the drug had faded, but Xie Qingcheng had yet to recover his full strength. Even so, he struggled as hard as he could. "How the fuck could you… Chen Yan, how could you! Ah?!" His eyes were red. "How could you do this too?!"

Chen Man pinned down his hands, staring into his face, pupils murky with the vehemence of his emotions. Xie Qingcheng was right there—he had the older brother he was afraid to ever disobey pinned down beneath him, in his control. Flames seemed to burn in his voice, flames that would scorch the tattered remnants of his rationality to ash.

"Because I like you, Xie-ge," he said, enunciating each word.

Xie Qingcheng said nothing.

"I've liked you for over a decade… I only regret that I was too good to you, and I didn't do this before He Yu fucked you! Did you really never…never notice my feelings? For all these years?!"

He'd hit rock bottom. Xie Qingcheng thought nothing could make his mood even worse tonight, but he was wrong. Staring into Chen Man's familiar yet alien

face, at the tears in his eyes, he had the split-second urge to just say fuck it to the entire world. What the hell was this? Animals, the lot of them!

He trembled in sheer rage. "…You say you liked me for over a decade…but I fucking trusted you for over a decade, Chen Yan! You're going to do this to me, huh? You're going to fucking do this to me?! Let go of me! *Let go!*"

In his hurt, Chen Man had lost all reason. He held Xie Qingcheng fast, refusing to let go. Continuously pierced with pain at the sight of He Yu's marks on his lips, he tried to lean in and kiss them again.

Finally freeing himself from Chen Man's grip, Xie Qingcheng slapped him across the face. Like a leopard on the hunt, he roared, "Get off! *Off!*"

This was the first time he had ever hit Chen Man… Normally, he would always choose to have a proper conversation with him. But after that slap, the pain in Chen Man's heart actually lessened—he had never experienced such a vivid emotion from Xie Qingcheng before.

Xie Qingcheng stared at him, eyes red, fury in every word. "Let go of me."

Chen Man's response was to use a textbook control hold to pin down Xie Qingcheng's arms. In the course of their violent struggle, he dislocated one of Xie Qingcheng's wrists. Xie Qingcheng let out a muffled groan of pain, sweat beading all along his back, and collapsed onto the bed, unable to move his arm.

Chen Man had spent the last twenty-some years of his life following the rules, never stepping over the line. But now he had truly lost his mind. "What do you see in him?" he asked quietly as he gazed at the miserable older man. "If it's his money or his status, I have both… If we return to Yanzhou, back to my grandfather's side, I could have even more power than He Yu—anything He Yu can give you, I can give you too. And…I can give you things he can't, too."

Xie Qingcheng felt as if he'd been slapped. The fact that Chen Man would say something like that to him… After seeing him in the Daylily Pavilion, Chen Man now asked him what he wanted: money, power, reputation, or other benefits. Things that the old Chen Man would never have said to him, words that stabbed him right through the chest.

"Xie-ge…tell me, what exactly do you want?"

Pinned beneath him, Xie Qingcheng could no longer move away. But his eyes had turned colder than they had been at any point since Chen Man walked into the room. Through gritted teeth, he said, "I want you to get out."

"That's the only exception." Chen Man's eyes turned bloodshot, but his voice was still quiet. "That's the only thing I can't promise you. If you can be with a man, Xie-ge… If you're not that…that unapproachable deity that I thought I knew…I should also take what I want." His fingers trembled, the light continuously shattering in his eyes.

"I should have taken it long ago… I should have…taken it long ago…"

His voice quavered as he reached for the buttons of Xie Qingcheng's silk shirt. Out of nerves, out of his broken emotions, out of the conflict raging inside his heart, his hands shook harder and harder, and he found himself unable to loosen the last few buttons.

Thinking back on it after the fact, Xie Qingcheng guessed that he still had an eternal bottom line, somewhere deep within his heart. The tremors running through

him may have been because deep down inside, his morals were holding him back, refusing to let him do something like this.

But he would never find out whether Chen Man really could stomp through that final bottom line and make the ultimate mistake if he was allowed to continue—because right then, the electronic door Chen Man had locked behind him beeped as it was unlocked.

Someone slammed it open from outside.

In his rage and confusion, Xie Qingcheng didn't get a good look at the person's face before he heard a twisted shout of rage, like an evil dragon slamming its tail against the sea, or hellfire crackling through the air. With a rush of air, the new arrival threw Chen Man bodily to the floor, the two young men tearing at each other like wild beasts gone mad.

"Don't you fucking dare touch him! You bastard, don't you fucking dare!"

Once he spoke, Xie Qingcheng instantly knew who the newcomer was, even if he couldn't see his face. It was He Yu, who had heard the sounds of their struggle when he came to check on Xie Qingcheng… It was He Yu, who hadn't wasted a single word or action before hacking into the lock and breaking through the door…

The endless pits of anger inside He Yu boiled to the surface. His eyes were red with bloodlust as he aimed for the bone with every blow, the two of them immediately falling into an all-out brawl.

"You fucking animal! Do you know what you're doing?! He's already suffered so much today, and you still want to humiliate him further?! Chen Yan, do you have any shame?! He fucking trusted you for so many years! Anyone could tell him you liked him, and he'd brush them off—you fucking—" With that, he landed another heavy kick. His body and hands were already bleeding as he roared at Chen Man, "What the—fucking hell—are you doing?! Is this how you're going to repay what you owe him for the last decade?!"

Chen Man was not to be outdone. Up in arms at running into their love rival, neither of these young men planned to keep up the pretense any further. "What right do you have to talk about me?" he countered furiously. "You didn't even spare your personal doctor. It's his own sister's wedding, and you had to make trouble, you had to humiliate him! He Yu, I'm telling you, you're the one who least has the right to criticize me!"

But He Yu wasn't listening to a word Chen Man said. The monitor watch on his wrist was rapidly turning red as he lost all control of his strength. Chen Man still had one last wisp of clarity in his breakdown, but He Yu had fully lost it. He was a madman. He really wanted—he really would take Chen Man's life. In their struggle, he smashed one of the room's lamps, picked up a sharp-edged shard of its base, and swung it downward.

"He Yu!" Xie Qingcheng called out to him.

It was just his name, but it halted him in his tracks like an incantation.

Xie Qingcheng got to his feet. Chen Man had dislocated one of his wrists, while the other arm was the one he had injured in Yi Village. He couldn't exert any force with that hand, but he still set it against the piece of lamp He Yu was holding. "Put that down. Put it down! If you're going to fight, get the hell out of the villa and fight outside. Out." After all the shocks he'd suffered that day, he had ended up in a state of extreme apathy. "Out, both of you."

“Xie Qingcheng…” He Yu began.

“Xie-ge…” Chen Man echoed.

Xie Qingcheng tightened his shirt with icy-cold fingers and closed his eyes. “Keep my name out of your mouth.”

He had discovered that people’s lives were simply not the same. Qin Ciyan could be a good elder, a good doctor, so he copied Qin Ciyan: He took care of He Yu, and comforted Chen Man. But the final result was just fucking absurd. He must be suffering eight lifetimes of rotten luck at once. Otherwise, why would two little whelps who didn’t even have hair on their chins fall in love with a stern older man? Was he cursed? Or did he commit some grave sin in a past life?

Especially Chen Man, who said he’d been in love with him for over a decade… How old was Chen Man a decade ago? What did he understand about love?

Although he’d occasionally had his suspicions, his faith that Chen Man wouldn’t be as unreliable as He Yu had been solid. No matter what He Yu said, he trusted Chen Man unconditionally. He had even quipped to himself that if Chen Man actually liked him too, it would be like a double serving of fortune, like winning a fifty million jackpot.

He really wished he could cash in his ticket at some lottery booth and demand his millions from Lady Luck. Why did he even try? Was there anything he could even do about those two?

How laughable… They both looked at him like he was prey. He was the only one who still thought of himself as an elder with any measure of authority. He had had enough with these rich young masters. He couldn’t understand any of this.

“Get the fuck out.”

Silence.

“Or do you want me to call the fucking police?!”

Those words hit Chen Man like ice water to the face. He paled, suddenly recalling his own profession. This identity was like a soul-summoning talisman, bringing him back from the swamp of his anger. Over the next minute, his head grew clearer and clearer. The bloody fog faded from his eyes as he stared at Xie Qingcheng’s wrinkled clothing and rumpled sheets. He realized what a serious mistake he had nearly made, and his heart jumped into his throat.

Like a drunken person being shocked to sobriety, he broke out in a cold sweat. “Xie-ge, I…” he stuttered.

“I’m saying this one last time. Both of you, get the fuck out.”

Chen Man wasn’t afraid because he might call the police and embarrass him in front of everyone. Rather, it was because he saw the numbness on Xie Qingcheng’s face now that he’d regathered his rationality.

There was also the discovery that Xie Qingcheng’s attitude toward He Yu was also cold, no better than how he had treated Chen Man. This was enough to shove Chen Man’s soul back inside his body, a maneuver so rough that it left his every muscle stiff; he couldn’t properly use something as delicate as his vocal cords.

After a long pause, he finally recovered control over his own body just as Xie Qingcheng opened his mouth again. “Ge…I’m sorry,” he said, deeply ashamed of

his actions and afraid he would tell him that he was terribly disappointed in him again, his voice nearly unrecognizable with strain.

"Get out!"

Chen Man left. Even he was unable to face the person he had been a scant fifteen minutes ago.

Xie Qingcheng turned his attention to He Yu. He was still refusing to leave, staring at him with reddened eyes in some half-sorrowful, half-crazed state. The monitor on his wrist continued to flash crimson.

Although He Yu indeed occupied a different position in his heart now, one thing after another had made this day just too much. He had resolved to end their entanglement. He knew He Yu all too well. If he treated him any differently than he treated Chen Man, He Yu would be able to tell that he felt something special for him, deep down in his heart. All his efforts would go to waste.

He closed his eyes to breathe for a moment, then opened them again. "You too," he said. "Shouldn't you—"

Before he could finish, He Yu picked up the dislocated wrist that he hadn't yet been able to treat. The pain of relocating a joint was nothing to Xie Qingcheng, but what He Yu said afterward was a needle into his insensate heart.

"He didn't know you injured your arm, but I do… Xie Qingcheng… I know it all…"

He held his hand, slowly interlacing his fingers. No longer able to dam up the raging tide of his emotions, he pulled Xie Qingcheng's weakened body against his chest. His other hand disappeared into the inky hair at the back of Xie Qingcheng's head.

"Xie Qingcheng," he said, "I'm begging you…don't chase me away, okay? Let me protect you…"

Held in his arms, Xie Qingcheng no longer had the strength to struggle. So, his lack of reciprocation was the iciest blade he could stab into He Yu's heart. "You're just the same as him," he said at last, his voice toneless. "Let go of me, He Yu."

Some people were like smoke, like fog, like flowing water or morning mist. No matter how you tried to embrace them or clutch them in your hands, you could never keep them. It was as if Xie Qingcheng was always going to leave, keeping his distance from everyone.

Slowly, he closed his eyes. "Listen to me. I will never like you back. Even if you can keep me at your side, it will only be my empty shell… Let go. Then, please leave."

No one else could know that as his empty shell said these words, the place where his heart should have been ached in pain.

Chapter 177:
That Earring Reappears

THE RUMORS of Xie Qingcheng and He Yu's affair at the Wei wedding banquet still got out in the end.

No one would say anything in public, but they were all eagerly gossiping it up behind closed doors. The secret did ultimately reach Xie Xue's ears, and after her initial shock and rage, she fell into severe distress.

She didn't think that a simple drugging incident was all this was. After all, He Yu and her brother's reactions after the fact weren't what they should have been if this had been an isolated accident. And as Xie Qingcheng's sister, after she calmed down, his emotional state was her primary concern. Everyone had kept it from her, so she hadn't known he had suffered something like that; only now did she understand why he'd acted so gloomy around that time, speaking even less than before.

She wanted to ask him exactly what had happened, but at the same time, she was too afraid to try. All she could do was take it out on Wei Dongheng. "I *said* it was He Yu and my brother at that hotel, but you insisted it couldn't be… If I'd known… If I'd known, I could have…" She bit her lip, unable to continue.

She knew that even if she had been certain it was them back then, she wouldn't have had the guts to chase them down and demand answers. She felt uncomfortable all over. The more she thought about it, the more clues surfaced in her mind.

She had once seen He Yu and her brother come out of an empty classroom, tugging each other by the arm. On New Year's, she had come home to see He Yu and her brother standing in a dark room, clothes disheveled, a vase shattered on the floor. She had seen He Yu oh-so-casually slip an arm around Xie Qingcheng's waist as they got into a taxicab…

It was a baking hot summer day, but her hands were ice-cold. Had they really been together for so long?

After her worry left her struggling to sleep for nights in a row, Xie Xue finally resolved to talk to her brother. It was summer break, so he wasn't living out of his faculty dorm, but staying back at home. Hesitantly, she showed up at the door to their house in Moyu Alley, holding a big basket of fruit and supplements. She peered through the window on tiptoe, but Xie Qingcheng wasn't in.

"Xiao-Xue?"

She turned to see that Li Miaoqing had come out of her home next door. "Auntie Li, where's my brother?"

"I don't know. I guess he had something to do." Li Miaoqing set her plastic tub of wet laundry on a stone footstool, wiped her hands on her apron, and looked into Xie Xue's face. "Xiao-Xue, come here," she said, concerned. She took her hand. "What's got you looking so pale? You've got black circles. Did something happen?"

She'd been holding it in for so long. As soon as Auntie Li asked after her, she immediately began to sob. "Auntie Li, my, my brother, he—" But she cut herself off halfway through her sentence.

Auntie Li had been there the day of the wedding, but she had been sticking close to Xie Xue herself to help out. What happened between Xie Qingcheng and He Yu was a secret among the elites, and the rumor was only spreading between those kinds of people. As far as Xie Xue knew, Auntie Li had yet to find out. She closed her mouth, her words sticking in her throat.

But when Auntie Li saw her emotional state and heard those first few words, she put the pieces together. "You…you know too?" she asked in a trembling voice. "About He Yu…"

Xie Xue's eyes went wide. The two women stared at each other for a long moment. Neither of them spoke the rest into the open, but they got their answer from each other's eyes.

Xie Xue suddenly threw herself into Auntie Li's arms, finally sobbing out loud.

"…And that's how it happened."

By the time Li Miaoqing finished explaining to Xie Xue how she had found out He Yu and Xie Qingcheng's secret, Xie Xue was still wiping her tears. But compared to her earlier hurt and confusion, the primary emotion she was feeling was rage.

What Li Miaoqing had seen and heard left her certain that He Yu was a scoundrel and playboy who had loved and left Xie Qingcheng, only to suddenly regret dropping him and try to convince him to come back. This had all left him in a terrible funk of defeated silence. She told all this to Xie Xue, and once Xie Xue's imagination filled in the gaps, everything went entirely off the rails—

He Yu must have gaslit her brother, alternating slaps to the face with little morsels of sweetness—luring him in only to viciously hurt him again, then coax him back with honeyed words, before finally pulling the sort of stunt he had in the Daylily Pavilion. And now, Young Master He thought it was too embarrassing and dumped Xie Qingcheng entirely, leaving her brother to suffer the pain of not only being lied to and abandoned by a mere boy, but also having his reputation destroyed in the process.

Xie Xue ground her teeth in rage. "That bastard… How dare he play games with my brother! No… I won't stand for it… I'm going to find him!"

A bit more rational, Auntie Li hurried to stop her. "Don't let your brother find out! He cares so much about his pride. If he knew we'd found out, it would only upset him even more."

"Don't worry, I'm only going to talk to He Yu. I just want to ask him what the hell he was thinking…"

At a minimum, Xie Xue was He Yu's teacher at university.

At most, she was the wife of the Wei family's third young master. She didn't care about social status and position, and Wei Dongheng had never really thrown the weight of his clan around. But when she visited high-end stores, the attendants now had to call her Madam Wei. Between that and her position as his teacher she

had every right to summon He Yu for a meeting.

But contrary to her expectations, he refused to pick up her calls. She called him seventeen or eighteen times, but in the end He Yu simply turned off his phone.

"Fuck! That bastard!" She tossed her phone down in rage, hailed a taxi, and gave the driver the address of the He residence, peeling off in a cloud of dust.

Outside the He residence, she was welcomed by their panicked-looking housekeeper. He had always been rather aloof to her when she was just the little Xie girl, but now he was perfectly courteous and attentive to Madam Wei.

"I want to see He Yu," she said, simmering with rage. "Please let him know that I'm here and to let me in."

The housekeeper immediately turned around to pass on the message. But shortly after, he came back out with trepidation written all over his face, as if there was something he was trying to hide.

"Madam Wei." He hesitated, then said, "Young Master He… Um, he's feeling unwell. He is unable to see you today. Why don't you pick another date?"

No matter how angry she was, she couldn't simply storm a private home by force. She gave one last glare at the brightly lit main building far past the gate… Only to notice a number of medical personnel streaming past the windows. One of them was even…

She started and rubbed her eyes, but that vaguely familiar silhouette disappeared around a corner. There was no way that person could be a doctor… Her eyes must have deceived her.

She huffed at the housekeeper. "How is he suddenly sick again?"

The housekeeper just laughed awkwardly, obviously in the conundrum of being unable to explain further.

Xie Xue wasn't the type of person to suddenly start abusing service staff after an abrupt rise in position, so seeing the man's plight, she didn't ask any more questions. She turned toward the main building again. This time, she saw the boy standing in one of the floor-to-ceiling windows of the third floor.

"He Yu—"

He was speaking to a nurse. Because of the distance, she couldn't quite see the expression on his face, but he had his arms crossed in an obviously defensive stance. The nurse hung his head, seemingly apologizing. He Yu finally turned his eyes away and glanced at where Xie Xue was standing at the villa's gated entrance.

A few moments of silence.

Suddenly, he reached up and drew the curtain closed.

She stomped her feet in anger, but there was nothing she could do. Finally she swept off in a huff. She had no idea how that little brute He Yu had gotten with an ascetic person like her brother, then proceeded to abuse him into such a wretched state.

…Her brother had always been good to He Yu. Even after so many years, he still looked after him. The way Xie Xue saw it, the care and attention he gave him far exceeded anything Xie Qingcheng afforded to his normal patients. Meanwhile, He Yu clearly knew that Xie Qingcheng was unlucky in marriage and had led a quiet and lonely life for years. Yet he still had to seduce him and ruin him, doing

something even more outrageous than Li Ruoqiu had done when she cheated on him.

What did her brother owe him, anyway? How could he?

She wanted to go back to Moyu Alley to keep Xie Qingcheng company, wanted to bring everything out into the open and comfort him properly, but she knew that Li Miaoqing had the right idea. He wasn't the type of man who liked to open up to other people, and whenever he had a problem, he preferred to quietly endure and process it all by himself with a cigarette in hand. He didn't want anyone to touch his scars, even to offer him healing.

At the thought, Xie Xue pulled out a pack of tissues from her bag and wiped the tears hanging from her lashes. She was going to put the rest of them back when her phone rang.

"Hello… Ge?" Xie Qingcheng had called her. She tried to keep her voice calm, hoping he wouldn't notice anything was wrong.

"Did you come to Moyu Alley this afternoon?"

"Y-yes. How did you know?"

"…You left your fruit in the doorway."

She silently smacked her head—her brain!

"Where are you?" His voice was as impassive as a chilly pond, unmarred by the slightest ripple.

"I…I saw you were out, so I went to the mall to browse…"

"Don't buy too many things you don't need," he said. He paused. "Are you eating dinner here? Or are you going home?"

"I'm going h—" Xie Xue choked on her words.

Before, when he asked her if she was going home, he meant the little apartment in Moyu Alley that belonged to the two of them. But now he was referring to her new place with Wei Dongheng. She had married into a new family, so Xie Qingcheng was the only one left in that little house. She clenched the tissue in her hands, tears running down her face reflected in the taxi window.

"Hello?" Xie Qingcheng's voice was still calm, magnetic, with the faintest hint of confusion. "Why did you stop talking?"

She muffled her sobs until her throat was sore. "…Nothing, I had bad signal for a moment there." After a pause, she said, "I'll come back. Ge, I'll have dinner at our home."

"Okay… When are you getting here?" That voice was still perfectly placid, but his ability to perfectly hide any trace of emotion only drove a spike through Xie Xue's heart.

"Maybe in half an hour?" she said quietly.

"Okay."

Before he could hang up, she said, "Ge."

"Hm? What is it?"

Xie Xue forced a wobbly smile onto her face through her tears. "I…I want to have your Yangzhou fried rice. You don't need to prepare too much, just a bowl of

Yangzhou fried rice, okay?”

Xie Qingcheng had raised her since she was young. He knew how to take care of people.

When Xie Xue walked in the door, he had just finished making a bowl of Yangzhou fried rice with no peas and set it on the table. The soup cooking in the instant pot was also done. He nodded at her in greeting, then went to get her a bowl. A tantalizing fragrance wafted through the room the moment he lifted the lid.

She didn’t need to look into the pot to know that it was a thick tomato and brisket soup. When she was growing up, they didn’t have a lot of money, but he would make brisket soup for her twice a week with the best beef he could buy. He would give Xie Xue all the meat and just drink some of the tomato soup with a few pieces of potato.

Staring at her brother’s tall, yet increasingly frail silhouette, Xie Xue felt a twinge in her heart. She darted up behind him and threw her arms around his waist.

Caught off guard, Xie Qingcheng set down his soup spoon and turned to look at her. “What is it? Did someone bully you?”

She shook her head. “I wanted to hug you,” she said in a small voice. He smelled faintly of tobacco and disinfectant, with a bitter tinge of medicine. It wasn’t a very nice scent, rather too cold, but Xie Xue found it comforting.

When new brides returned to their old homes for the first time, they would often act nostalgic; Xie Qingcheng didn’t think too much of her behavior. He sighed, quietly coughed into his hand, and let her hold him for a while. Finally he said, “Let go, the food will get cold.”

They sat down at the dining table.

Xie Qingcheng was a bit off-balance today. Xie Xue was pregnant, so he couldn’t smoke in her presence, which made his defeated and absent-minded state even more apparent. But he was still very handsome, with his model-pretty face. His shirt was opened three buttons down instead of buttoned to the neck like usual, revealing the elegant line of his collarbones and a small glimpse of jade-skinned chest.

He had too many things on his mind to look at her while he ate. He subconsciously tapped his fingers against the table, a habit born from how often he tapped the ash from the end of a cigarette. It was clear that he was struggling to resist.

“Ge, have some more,” Xie Xue said quietly, placing several pieces of beef from the soup into Xie Qingcheng’s bowl. “You’ve gotten so thin.”

He was going to make her take it back, but the realization suddenly struck him that she was no longer that little girl who spent every week looking forward to those few pieces of good meat. His chopsticks hung suspended in the air, and then he set them back down. Gathering himself, he finally looked at Xie Xue’s face, preparing to discuss a few things about domestic life with her now that she was married. But at this first glance he froze, his hands going ice-cold—

A new earring hung from Xie Xue’s ear.

It was a pure-gold cross molded in the shape of a pair of bones, with a ring in the middle embedded with crimson stones, orbited by three letters: R.I.P. Before

they'd died, Xie Qingcheng's parents had met with a mysterious person in Yanzhou… A mysterious person who'd left behind the exact same earring!

It was perfectly identical!

Xie Qingcheng shot to his feet. "Xie Xue, where did you get that earring?"

The year the Xie parents had died, he had gone to Yanzhou on his own to investigate. He'd been fortunate enough to make contact with a waiter from the same club they'd visited. The waiter sent him a picture of an earring in the shape of a cross with the letters R.I.P., which he had discovered when cleaning the private room after his parents' meeting with that mysterious person.

Everyone was using Nokia phones back then, and the multimedia download had crawled at a snail's pace. Even today, Xie Qingcheng could still clearly remember how that image had loaded in bit by bit as the entirety of that mysterious earring was revealed to him.

The waiter agreed to meet with him in a hot pot restaurant to give him the earring, but the restaurant caught fire and the waiter died. Xie Qingcheng had been hit by a car, and they took his phone along with the only copy of the picture he had.

Now, nineteen years after the fact, he could only see that strange golden cross in his dreams. The letters R.I.P. engraved in the earring were a deeply embedded taunt, laughing at him from his nightmares—rest in peace, Xie Qingcheng. Stop investigating. You're nothing but a moth to the flame. If the mastermind wishes it, death is but a second away.

But now, this earring had migrated from dream to reality when he was least expecting it, presenting itself to him dangling from his newly married sister's ear.

His body chilled down to the marrow. "Where did you get that?" he repeated in a trembling voice, staring at her.

Spooked, Xie Xue touched her ear. "This? My mother-in-law gave it to me."

Chapter 178:
The Evidence Lines Up Again

YANZHOU'S GOVERNMENT and wealthy business clans were always a bit more superstitious than those from other places.

The Wei family were a prime example. They were the type of people who would get a Daoist priest to do a reading because a daughter of theirs fled from the altar, then hold all their following weddings in the villa the priest indicated was most advantageous to them. And this was only the tip of the iceberg. Gifting their new brides with a bone cross earring engraved with the characters R.I.P. was one of the Wei family's traditions that was little known to anyone outside the family. This rule had started even earlier than the one about the wedding location, and even among the members of the Wei family themselves, its origins were an ancient legend.

Supposedly, around the end of the Qing dynasty and the beginning of the Republican era, a Wei ancestor had saved a young girl with naturally blonde hair and brown eyes. Her mother had once worked as the lowest-tier kind of prostitute and never said a word to the girl about her birth father, raising her daughter by herself while working as a tenant laborer in a store. Several years later, she passed away, and the store where she'd worked wasn't doing well. Their earnings weren't enough to keep up with their debts, and their creditor tried to sell the hapless girl to pay them off.

Thanks to her mother's influence, the girl believed in Jesus Christ and liked to listen to traveling preachers' sermons. In terms of ideology, she hardly fit in with the rest of society. Not many large families would be willing to buy that kind of strange little girl as a maid, much less a wife or a concubine. She didn't even hesitate to talk back to her creditor.

One time, she went too far, and in his rage, her creditor took a burning coal and forced her to swallow it. Her throat and tongue were ruined and she was left on the verge of death, but her creditor had no sympathy for her; he only found the whole situation troublesome. He ended up throwing her out to live or die on her own.

That was when the Wei family's ancestor had taken the girl in. This old ancestor of theirs ran a medicine shop. He was a kindhearted man, and his own son had recently passed away from a terminal illness. He couldn't bear to see the poor girl suffer. The old man brought her home, treated her injuries, and showed her kindness. But the girl's condition was dire, and with the state of medicine at the time, even the best care he could give her wasn't enough. She was going to die.

On her deathbed, she begged the old man to find her a cross. She said she wanted to leave this world with a cross in her hand.

The old man didn't know where to find a Western thing like that, but he couldn't bear to see the girl's last wish unfulfilled, so he took a few pieces of wood and fashioned one for her himself. That night, the girl stared and stared at the cross. As she soundlessly muttered a few words, a bloody tear rolled from her eye and dripped onto the cross before she suddenly passed.

Sympathetic to her situation, the old man prepared to have her buried with a proper funeral. But the night before the funeral, he had a mysterious dream. He dreamt that the young girl, now sporting a pair of snowy-white wings, descended on a dais of auspicious clouds and told him with a voice fit for an angel that she had come to thank him for taking care of her at the end of her life. She said that the old man could bury her beside his son who had left the world too early, so she could rightfully accompany his child in another life and bring fortune to his descendants.

The old man didn't believe her at first, but the girl said, *When you wake tomorrow morning, go to my coffin and look—the wooden cross I was holding will have become a cross of pure gold.*

Upon waking up, he immediately went to the funeral home and opened the coffin—indeed, the girl was holding a shining golden cross, and the spot where her bloody tear had fallen was now a glimmering red gem with the engraved letters R.I.P.

No longer daring to neglect her request, he immediately arranged to do as she had said. Ever since then, the Wei family climbed up and up in the world, each generation reaching higher than the last. At the age of a hundred, the old Wei ancestor left a final testament cautioning his family to never forget this angel. He set a rule that every time a Wei daughter married out of the family or a new bride married in, they had to wear the same kind of golden cross for the first month after the wedding out of respect for the girl.

As the years passed, the golden cross gradually converged into a consistent design. In the sixties, the earring with a golden bone cross, red gemstones, and an R.I.P. carving was ubiquitous among the Wei women.

"But Wei Dongheng told me in private that he thinks one of his ancestors definitely prettied up the story," Xie Xue added. "He doesn't believe in angels or deities. He thinks the R.I.P. carving probably means that someone up the line did something that weighed on their conscience, and the tradition isn't done out of gratitude, but to appease an angry spirit. He suspects that the girl might have been strong-armed into participating in a ghost wedding, or even killed for it. When he read through that time period in the family register, he saw that a number of new brides in the family died in a row. Maybe their ancestors thought that the girl who participated in that ghost marriage was still lingering, and created the custom of the golden cross to help new brides ward her off. But in order to protect their family's reputation and not scare the new brides, the Wei family may have come up with this charming story to hide the dark, bloody truth."

Xie Qingcheng didn't have much interest in the story, but his heart still skipped a beat at the realization—because now, he finally had an answer to the riddle which had been repeating through his nightmares for nearly twenty years. The R.I.P. earring belonged to a female member of the Wei family, one who had recently married. This was the true identity of the mysterious person his parents had met with before their deaths!

"Ge, is there something wrong with it?" she asked tentatively after she'd finished her explanation.

He was terribly concerned, but he didn't know what he could say. If a member of the Wei family had killed his parents—perhaps even Wei Dongheng's mother, or one of his sisters—what was Xie Xue to do? Aside from that, he thought of a more chilling possibility.

After he was hit by the car, he'd only survived because of Lao-Qin's assistance. Maybe the organization hadn't verified whether he had died at first—after all, given his state after the crash, there was little chance he would survive. But later on, there was every reason to believe they knew he was still alive… After all these years, they had never tried to assassinate him again, nor had they tried to capture and study him. Xie Qingcheng initially thought maybe he was just inconsequential to them, and if he didn't continue to investigate the truth, the organization wouldn't pay him any attention.

But if the killer was a member of the Wei family, and Xie Xue married Wei Dongheng…was there another possibility? Perhaps they had been watching Xie Qingcheng's every move ever since then, but had decided not to do anything to him for some unknown reason and chosen to target Xie Xue instead. This was a terrifying line of thought. It was like he was walking on a narrow bridge where a single misstep could leave him tumbling into a bottomless ravine. He didn't pursue it any further.

"Ge?"

"…It's nothing. I've seen a similar one before, but now that I'm looking at it closer, it doesn't actually resemble it very much." With this half-hearted excuse, he sat back down, putting a spoonful of soup in his sister's bowl. "Eat."

Both of the siblings had a lot on their minds, so neither of them noticed how off the other was over the course of the meal. When they finished, Xie Qingcheng used work as an excuse to send Xie Xue away.

After she left, he pulled out a cigarette, sitting on the edge of his bed and smoking as he thought through all the leads he had gathered. He tried to keep his cool, coughing as he flicked ash from the end of his smoke. He decided to follow this line of inquiry and do his own investigation.

The circumstances of this investigation were very similar to the one he'd undertaken nineteen years ago. He had nothing to look to for guidance, and no one he could ask for help. His relationship with Chen Man had become extremely awkward. Zheng Jingfeng was the rigid type who would never get talked into breaking the rules to help him investigate. And He Yu…

He Yu's hacking abilities were extremely useful, but Xie Qingcheng couldn't stay in contact with him, much less involve him in this.

Fortunately, he wasn't incapable of acting on his own. Finding the owner of the lost R.I.P. earring was as simple as figuring out which Wei woman had been newly married at the time. First of all, he could exclude Wei Dongheng's mother. By the dates of the Wei siblings' births, Wei Dongheng's mother must have married into the family long before his parents' accident. This eased some of his worries.

His second breakthrough came from the internet.

Xie Qingcheng used the techniques he had learned from He Yu while they were searching for evidence of Huang Zhilong's dark history, digging up some old web pages from twenty years ago out of the vast sea of information.

"Alliance of the strong; a joyful union: The Wei and Meng clans join in marriage."

The article had been posted just a few months before his parents were killed.

When he found this search result, his heart stopped beating in his chest. He immediately moved his cursor to the link. However—*Error 404.*

Any straight man would take a psychological blow coming across this sort of "page not found" error while browsing explicit websites. Although Xie Qingcheng had never suffered exactly that kind of blow in his thirty-some years of life, he was now able to relate perfectly. It wasn't just the one website. Every relevant link he found gave him this sort of notification. He couldn't even find a photograph or the names of the newlywed couple.

He didn't give up there, though. At the very least, he had been able to confirm that twenty years ago, one of the Wei women had married into a notable Meng family. With this amount of information, he could probably find out the owner of that earring just by asking Wei Dongheng a few leading questions. But out of an abundance of caution, he wouldn't dare. He figured there was a way he could investigate with more secrecy.

That private villa in Hangshi.

Because of their family's rule, the Wei family held all of their weddings in that villa. The staff there had conducted so many ceremonies for them; if he just asked them which Wei daughter had been married there twenty years ago, they wouldn't be able to answer. But according to the evidence he discovered on the internet, that young mistress had gotten married to a groom with the surname Meng who was a perfect match for her in status and position. It had even made the society news. This would have been no small wedding, and it should have left a heavy impression.

So Xie Qingcheng sent someone to ask around the older workers in the villa under the guise of starting casual conversation, trying to set up an encounter with a white-haired palace maid who still remembered Emperor Xuanzong.

Over half a month later, he finally got an update. There actually was an old warehouse manager in his fifties who remembered the event, and told his informant about that golden couple.

"That bride, her name was Wei Rong. As for the groom…he was the second young master of Meng Enterprises… Aiyo…" The old warehouse manager clicked his tongue. "I've served a lot of high-class customers in my time, but none were as difficult as that pair of newlyweds. They nearly cost me my job…"

According to him, Wei Rong had been the strangest new bride he had ever met. Everyone else was happy when they were getting married, and even if a few didn't quite feel that way, they would at least put a smile on their face for good luck.

Not Wei Rong.

She kept criticizing everything the wedding team did on the day of the ceremony, and would fly into a temper any time something didn't exactly match up to her expectations. The warehouse manager prepared a few mascot costumes for the workers to wear while they handed out candy and colorful ornaments to the children. One of them was Mickey Mouse in his red shorts, but Wei Rong flew into a rage when she saw Mickey bouncing around the event space, questioning who made the decision to have him there—didn't they know she hated the color red?

The wedding team had been made aware of this. While the new bride was planning her wedding, she demanded everyone's clothing should be Western in

style and she refused to have any red decorations. Even the flower arrangements couldn't have red roses or other red flowers. Everyone did as she requested, but how were they to know that she couldn't even tolerate a Mickey Mouse mascot costume? The warehouse manager had been harshly scolded, and Wei Rong even demanded the establishment fire him on the spot.

Fortunately, his manager sympathized with his family's situation—he wasn't well off, and had a wife, a child, and an old mother to take care of—and told Wei Rong he would definitely be fired, but never actually took action against him.

Although the warehouse manager kept his job at the villa, Wei Rong's despotic behavior had left a deep impression on him. Even after twenty years, he could still clearly recall the incident.

After receiving this update, Xie Qingcheng immediately searched again for any information about Wei Rong and her husband with the surname Meng. This time, he got many more results.

The Meng groom was actually the third young master of the Meng real estate enterprise. He had emigrated from the country and was now doing business in Singapore, and Wikipedia had his current photograph and information. In the row for his spouse wasn't "Wei Rong," though, but the name of a foreign woman. Xie Qingcheng read the entire article. Wei Rong wasn't mentioned anywhere. It was as if the woman had never appeared in this Meng scion's life. If not for his own investigation, he would have thought this man had never met Wei Rong at all.

Unwilling to give up, he did another search for Wei Rong alone. This time, the search engine only turned up a scant few results, but the ones that did appear were shocking enough. Because nearly every search result was a report on the same topic: Wei Rong, princess of the Wei group, dies in car crash.

And the articles were all dated one week after the accident that killed Xie Qingcheng's parents.

Chapter 179:
He Said Goodbye

ACCORDING TO the evidence Xie Qingcheng had discovered thus far, this was the order of events:

In the process of investigating a certain case, Xie Ping and Zhou Muying met with Wei Rong in a club in Yanzhou. Not long afterward, they were both demoted, then died after being struck by a self-immolating truck while running personal errands. A week after the Xie couple passed, the newly married Wei Rong died as well, also because of a car accident.

Xie Qingcheng found the date when Wei Rong's husband—his full name was Meng Sheng—had remarried. It was half a year after his first wife died. This timing also gave him some food for thought. Under ordinary circumstances, when a person's new spouse died in a tragic accident, even if the widow or widower remarried, it would be at least a few years after the fact. There were only three reasons a man might remarry so soon after his wife died.

Number one: He had gotten with his new flame before his wife died, and his legal wife's death provided the perfect opportunity for his mistress to take her place.

Number two: His family still kept up with the outdated tradition of warding off a recent tragedy with new joy.

Number three: The couple had no affection for each other in the first place.

In marriage alliances between large clans, the third situation was the most common. But marrying a new woman within half a year, when Wei Rong's body had hardly cooled in her grave, especially when she had passed in a tragic accident? This would undoubtedly offend the Wei family. But the strange thing was, his remarriage hadn't affected the relationship between the Wei and Meng families in any significant capacity. They'd carried on their business collaborations and social calls as usual, as if the Wei family found no fault in Meng Sheng's choice at all. The case was once again enshrouded in mystery.

However, it was undoubtedly true that hidden behind the mystery of Wei Rong was a valuable clue that could crack the case of his parents' murders wide open.

Xie Qingcheng let out a sigh of relief. He always thought the person his parents had met with was the culprit, but looking at this new evidence, perhaps they had just met with another victim. If Wei Rong was also a casualty of the plot, then it was unlikely that Xie Xue's new family was on the side of the culprit.

He could continue his line of investigation.

In the blink of an eye, it was already a week into July, the beginning of the eleventh solar term known as the "little heat." Xie Qingcheng took a moment out of his busy day to make a pot of pea and sausage rice.

He had restarted his investigation, while also racing against time to finish Lao-Qin's manuscript. With these two arduous tasks weighing on him, even using

RN-13 to activate his abilities as the First Emperor and maintain an agility of mind that far exceeded that of an ordinary person, he was extremely exhausted.

"Pea and sausage rice during the little heat is the best meal for physical and mental energy."

This was what Zhou Muying had told him when he was little. Even though there was no scientific evidence behind it, sometimes psychological comfort was much more important than scientific evidence.

After washing a pot of Dongbei rice, he added in diced sausage and cured meat and cooked it all together in a covered pot. It was a simple summertime meal, but the fragrance wafted from the pot and the texture was soft and springy, the plump grains of rice having soaked in all the fat from the meat. Even Xie Xue, who didn't like peas, would have three bowls in a row.

This was the first time Xie Qingcheng had made a pot of pea rice just for himself.

"…I made too much."

He stared at the pot brimming with rice and went to call Xie Xue, but in the end he set his phone down with a sigh. That afternoon, he'd received a call from Wei Dongheng's brother, who said the police had given him the results of the investigation into the drugging at the wedding banquet.

"It's fucking absurd. They confirmed there was a concentrated hallucinogen and aphrodisiac in the incense from the remaining ashes, so it was undoubtedly a premeditated crime, but they interrogated that housekeeper for over a month and she still didn't provide any useful information. She's got to be better than the special forces."

"Did she have any nosebleeds?" Xie Qingcheng asked suddenly.

"No." Wei Dongheng's brother was confused. "Why do you ask?"

"…It's nothing."

Even though Huang Zhilong's company had been uprooted, the core secret of the obedience potion was still confined to a small subset of people. If the existence of this kind of chemical product was publicized, the consequences would be unimaginable.

Meiyu Private Hospital had studied their sample. Although the new obedience potion had many similarities to RN-13, its power and side effects were much reduced in comparison. Its effect on the body was only temporary, and as far as they knew, it was unlikely to induce a disease as severe as psychological Ebola.

However, it could still cause a certain degree of harm to its users, including conditions such as depression, anxiety, paranoia… On the severe side, some users like Xie Xue could faint or develop hypersomnia. According to Meiyu's investigation, the best predictor for whether a victim would develop this kind of damage was whether they developed intermittent nosebleeds within the first two months after using the drug. If they did, they had to receive treatment. If they didn't, that meant the obedience potion hadn't caused too much harm to the patient, so there was no need for further intervention.

"But the He family's reaction is odd," Wei Dongheng's brother continued on the other end of the phone. "Their eldest son got dragged into this, but it's been a month and they still haven't asked a single question about the investigation. They

haven't even shown their faces at the police department; it's like they don't care at all."

"…Maybe they figured that He Yu wasn't the original target, and that whoever did this wasn't plotting against their family."

"That's still ridiculous." Wei-erge was clearly upset. "He's their child, isn't he? I did hear that the He family was notoriously biased and both parents only care about their younger son, but I didn't believe it at the time. I suppose I've been enlightened."

Xie Qingcheng didn't comment on that. "What was the final result of the investigation?" he asked.

"The drug is something that's never been seen within our borders, but traffickers were arrested with it in their possession once in the Golden Triangle. It's an intoxicant incense produced by a certain foreign pharmaceutical company, using a loophole in the local laws. It's a cross-border case now, so it's difficult to investigate, but since they tried to harm a member of our family, I'll follow it outside the country until we get some answers. Don't worry. The Wei family isn't such an easy target. We wouldn't abandon a member of our own like the He family would."

"…Thank you."

Wei Dongheng's brother snapped his fingers like a proper military rogue, and chuckled. "No problem. We're one family now, after all."

After hanging up the call, Xie Qingcheng frowned.

From his earlier arguments with Lü Zhishu, it was clear that she cared a lot about the reputation of her family. Why hadn't she done anything during this case? And where was He Jiwei? Why hadn't he done anything either? Xie Qingcheng had always had the impression that He Jiwei wasn't that kind of man: He cared about He Yu at least a little. But now that he had broken it off with the He family entirely, no one could answer Xie Qingcheng's questions.

That evening, Xie Qingcheng reheated a bowl of pea rice, preparing to have dinner before he went back to work. But he had only just opened the rice cooker when a hesitant knock came at the door.

He was surprised at who he found outside.

"…Chen Man."

Chen Yan, whom he hadn't seen since the wedding.

Chen Man had apologized to him by text and phone call, but Xie Qingcheng hadn't said much either time. His attitude was, *It's in the past. Going forward, let's just pretend this absurd thing never happened, lest it be awkward for both of us.*

Chen Man had tried to see Xie Qingcheng in person several times, but he always refused him. And now Chen Man had simply shown up at his door.

"Xie-ge…" It was obvious that Chen Man was very nervous. He handed Xie Qingcheng a giant pile of gift boxes, then hesitantly said, "I… Can I come in and sit?"

Xie Qingcheng said nothing. Since Chen Man was already here, it would be inappropriate to just shut the door in his face, so he opened the door and turned aside to let him in. He didn't close the door after Chen Man walked inside, though,

leaving it open so all his neighbors could see what was going on inside his home. They used to get on as easily as brothers, but now, the air between them was stiff as could be.

A long silence.

In the end, Xie Qingcheng was the first to speak. “Have you eaten?”

“N-not yet…”

He got out another bowl and pair of chopsticks, and scooped out a second portion of rice. “Sit and eat. You can talk over dinner.”

He never looked into Chen Man’s eyes.

Chen Man had eaten Xie Qingcheng’s pea rice when he was young. It had been during this same month the year after his brother passed, and he had come over to the apartment to ask for help with his lessons. Xie Qingcheng patiently went over the material with him, and at dinnertime, he called Chen Man and Xie Xue over to the little courtyard in Moyu Alley, where the three of them sat beneath the flowering magnolia tree to eat their rice and drink cups of watermelon juice…

When he thought back on it now, it seemed like a dream.

“Xie-ge, I came over today because I wanted to apologize to you. In the villa, I—”

Xie Qingcheng interrupted him. “You already messaged and called. You don’t need to bring this up again.”

Chen Man looked at the man sitting across from him. “No, Ge, please let me finish this time,” he insisted. “Because…because I’m going to be leaving Huzhou soon.”

Xie Qingcheng’s hand paused, hovering over his chopsticks. He looked at Chen Man’s face for the first time. The young man’s cheeks had lost a layer of fat.

“I’m leaving Huzhou soon,” Chen Man repeated, throat a little thick.

“…For Yanzhou?”

He shook his head. “Guangshi.”

“Why are you going there?”

Chen Man ducked his head. After a long moment, he looked back up, expression anguished yet resolute. “I requested to be transferred. Guangshi has a lot of international traffic, and the criminal investigation department has been short-staffed lately. I requested to go there as a front-line criminal police officer… I’ve already received my official transfer notice. I’m leaving the day after tomorrow.”

Xie Qingcheng said nothing at first. The fan spun overhead, the faint buzz it gave off the only sound in the quiet room. Then he slapped his bowl and chopsticks against the table and shot to his feet. “Chen Yan. What the hell are you doing? Are you mad?!”

Lowering his head, Chen Man didn’t say a word.

“Don’t you know that the understaffed positions over there are all the most dangerous ones? That they’re taking missions with a casualty rate second only to ones bordering the Golden Triangle? Someone with your brains, working as a front-line criminal police officer in Guangshi? Why don’t you just find a tree and fucking hang yourself instead?!”

Chen Man's face flushed, tears seeming to well in his eyes.

Still Xie Qingcheng hadn't said enough. "Why are you crying?" he snapped. "Your brother's the one who should be crying! Your parents, your grandfather, they're the ones who should be crying! Tell me, do you not like living? What are you trying to prove, huh? You're still a little brat without any hair on your chin—why the hell are you looking for death?! Do you think you're some kind of hero?!"

"My brother also—"

"Your brother is your brother! You're you! Your brother was at the top of his class in the police academy, and he still lost his life! One of the others in his cohort, his brother-in-arms, also studied under my parents, also had top scores, and he lost his life too! And you?! You should just stay in your local police station. What's wrong with the local police station? Do you think some police branches are less respectable than others?"

"No." After Xie Qingcheng's through chiding, Chen Man finally argued back in a trembling voice, an intense light flashing in his eyes. "That's not true, Ge. I don't think there's anything wrong with the civil police, but I know that as long as I stay in Huzhou, being taken care of by you, by my parents, and by my grandfather, I'll always be a kid who can't grow up. You all cherish me, but none of you respect me… I can't even respect myself!"

A silence.

"That day in your hotel room, I lost all reason. If I were mature enough, I would have never done something like that. I shouldn't have said all those hurtful things. I crossed a line." He roughly wiped at his eyes, then got to his feet. "Xie-ge, I'm sorry. You trusted me and treated me well for so many years, but I hurt you. I've failed to live up to your expectations. I've betrayed your care."

Even after his tears were wiped away, his eyes were still red. "I don't know what's going on between you and He Yu, but I know that no matter what you did, you're still that very, very good person I know. Maybe I don't deserve to know the truth behind all this, but I should have trusted you, just like you trusted me."

Xie Qingcheng still didn't say anything.

"Maybe this is the only way you'll look at me for real."

Xie Qingcheng put a hand to his forehead, his heart burning in dismay. "Chen Man… Whether or not I look at you isn't going to change depending on how mature you are. I don't like you in the first place. I don't like men…"

Chen Man interrupted him. "If you don't like men, why were you with He Yu?"

"I…"

One second passed, then two, then three.

Chen Man waited for an answer he never received, while Xie Qingcheng searched for an answer he couldn't give.

Both of them went mute.

Chen Man's heart was rent with pain. "Xie-ge… When you look at him, your eyes aren't the same as when you look at me… I'm too stupid. All that time, and I never noticed, until I thought back on things after the fact… In your eyes, he's no longer just someone you're protecting. When you look at him…you… At school, in

the hotel, your face when you look at him isn't the same as when you look at me…"

This was news to Xie Qingcheng. Was it true?

"I know," Chen Man sobbed. "I know you don't like me. I'm too immature. I'm not smart enough…but I want to grow too. I want to change. I don't want to look back when I'm eighty and see that I led a terrible, cowardly life. Always a child, with no ideas of my own."

Xie Qingcheng closed his eyes. "…Do your parents and grandfather know?"

"They only found out yesterday."

"…What do you mean no ideas of your own," Xie Qingcheng said through gritted teeth, both furious and worried—he still cared about Chen Man, in the end. "You have too many ideas of your own. Chen Yan, you have all the ideas in the world! Your stubbornness knows no bounds! I once thought that out of you, He Yu, and Xie Xue, you were the one least likely to disappoint me. Looking back now, I was far off in left field!"

"I'm not trying to be stubborn. I just wanted…I just wanted to change. I just wanted to train, so all of you wouldn't just see me as a thing to protect. I just…I just thought, Xie-ge, that if I grew up, maybe one day…maybe…a day would come when you would—"

He didn't finish his sentence—because Xie Qingcheng didn't let him finish. "I won't like you back, Chen Man. I'm your elder."

There was silence for a long time.

"And He Yu?"

"…He's not the same. Too many things happened between us. I can't explain it to anyone." Xie Qingcheng had never admitted his feelings to He Yu, but he was finally saying them out loud to Chen Man. "Yes, He Yu isn't the same. There's not a single person who could replace him."

After a pause, he added, "If you're risking your life to be a criminal police officer in Guangshi for me, you have no reason to do so."

Chen Man stared blankly at him, tears welling up in his eyes once again. His hand shot up to cover his eyes. "…I'm not doing it for you, Xie-ge," he rasped out at last. "I'm doing it so I can stand before all of you as an equal."

At that, he bowed toward Xie Qingcheng, and, unable to bear the pain in his heart, turned and fled out the door. The bowl of pea rice, just the same as the one he ate during his childhood, sat untouched, already chilled through.

Xie Qingcheng slowly sat back down in his chair, face half hidden behind the curtain of his hair. It was impossible to see what sort of expression he wore. After a beat, he suddenly got to his feet and flipped the table in a fit of passion, spilling the dishes across the floor. He panted, pressing a hand to his forehead, and slid to the ground…

He pulled out a cigarette and lit it with trembling hands. But before it got anywhere close to his lips, the coppery-sweet tang of blood rose in his throat. He fell into a coughing fit and extinguished the cigarette with a curse, tossing it to the ground—the mess all over his floor seemed to be ridiculing the dreadful state of his life.

At the same time, an event of great secrecy was occurring in the He manor—

"…I apologize. We tried our best, but there was truly nothing we could do… My condolences, everyone…"

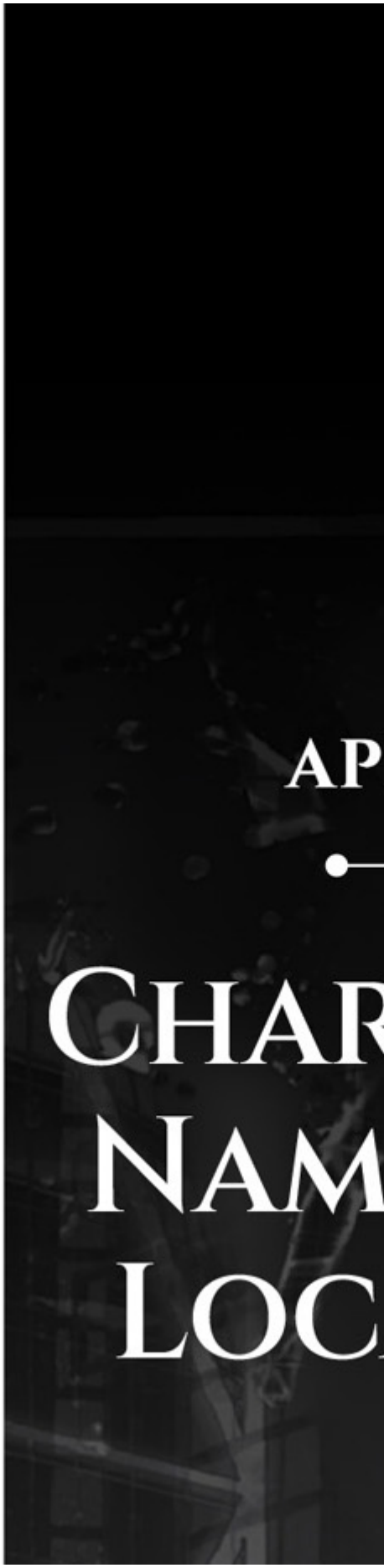
The paramedics didn't move the patient in the bed onto their stretcher, as they'd made their diagnosis at the scene—this patient was long dead, the body already cold. A white cloth was slowly drawn over the body, covering the face of the deceased.

The villa was as silent as the grave.

THE STORY CONTINUES IN

CASE FILE COMPENDIUM

VOLUME 7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CHARACTERS

Main Characters

HE YU □□: A nineteen-year-old university student with a rare mental illness.

XIE QINGCHENG □□□: He Yu's former doctor, who currently works as a medical school professor.

Supporting Characters

XIE XUE □□: Xie Qingcheng's younger sister, and a lecturer at He Yu's university.

WEI DONGHENG □□□: Xie Xue's boyfriend, a Huzhou University student from a wealthy family.

CHEN YAN □□: A police officer and family friend of Xie Qingcheng. Nicknamed "Chen Man."

QIN CIYAN □□□: Xie Qingcheng's former colleague, who was killed by the angry son of a patient.

LI RUOQIU □□□: Xie Qingcheng's ex-wife.

LÜ ZHISHU □□□: He Yu's mother, a wealthy businesswoman.

HE JIWEI □□□: He Yu's father, a wealthy businessman who is often away from home.

HUANG ZHILONG □□□: A powerful entertainment executive.

ZHENG JINGFENG □□□: A veteran criminal investigator and former colleague of Xie Qingcheng's parents.

DUAN WEN □□: A mysterious figure working in the shadows.

Name Guide

Diminutives, Nicknames, and Name Tags

DA-: A prefix meaning "big" or "elder," which can be added before titles for elders, like "dage" or "dajie," or before a name.

DI/DIDI: A word meaning "younger brother." It can also be used to address an unrelated (usually younger) male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

GE/GEGE: A word meaning "older brother." It can also be used to address an unrelated male peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

JIE/JIEJIE: A word meaning "elder sister." It can also be used to address an unrelated female peer, and optionally used as a suffix.

LAO-: A prefix meaning "old." Usually added to a surname and used in informal contexts.

LAOSHI: A word meaning "teacher" that can be used to refer to any educator, often in deference. Can also be attached to someone's name as a suffix.

LAOBAN: A word meaning “boss” that can be used to refer to one’s superior or the proprietor of a business. Can also be attached to someone’s name as a suffix.

SAOZI/-SAO: A word meaning “elder brother’s wife.” It can be used to address the wife (or informally, girlfriend) of an unrelated male peer.

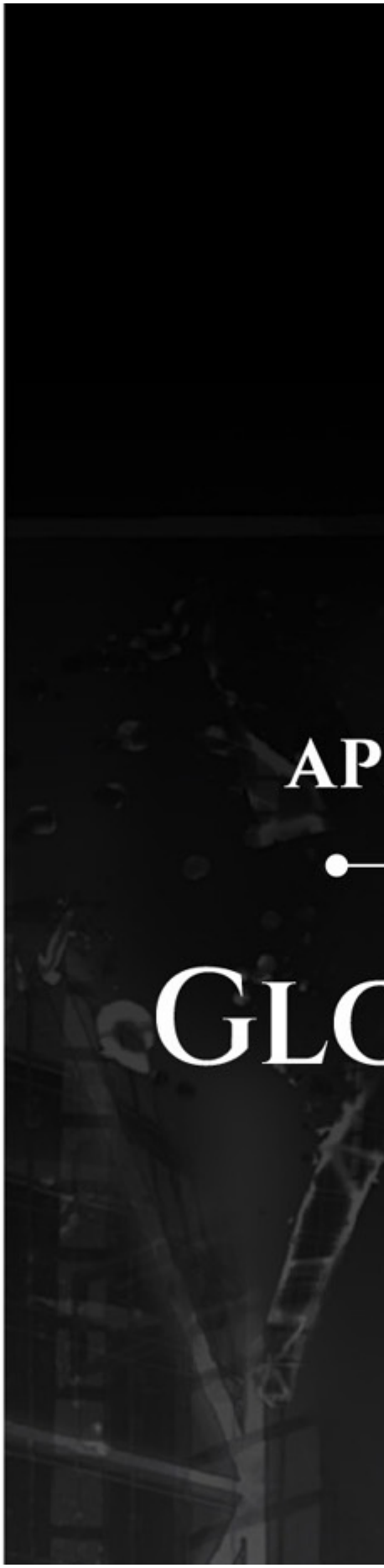
XIAO-: A prefix meaning “little” or “younger.” Often used in an affectionate and familiar context.

XUEZHANG: Older male classmate.

XUEDI: Younger male classmate.

XUEJIE: Older female classmate.

XUEMEI: Younger female classmate.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GLOSSARY

BAIDU: A Chinese tech company that provides a variety of online services. Its search engine, Baidu Search, and its online encyclopedia, Baidu Baike, are comparable in popularity to Google and Wikipedia in other countries.

EYES: Descriptions like “almond eyes” or “peach-blossom eyes” refer to eye shape. Almond eyes have a balanced shape, like that of an almond, whereas peach-blossom eyes have a rounded upper lid and are often considered particularly alluring.

FACE: *Mianzi* (□□), generally translated as “face,” is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person’s reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, “having face” refers to having a good reputation, and “losing face” refers to having one’s reputation hurt. Meanwhile, “giving face” means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while “not wanting face” implies that a person is acting so poorly or shamelessly that they clearly don’t care about their reputation at all. “Thin face” refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, “thick face” refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

JADE: Jade is a semi-precious mineral with a long history of ornamental and functional usage in China. The word “jade” can refer to two distinct minerals, nephrite and jadeite, which both range in color from white to gray to a wide spectrum of greens.

UNIVERSITIES AND CLASS STRUCTURE: In Chinese universities, students are assigned to a class of students in their major. Each class takes their major courses together for the duration of their university career.

WECHAT: A Chinese instant messaging, social media, and mobile payment app ubiquitous in modern Chinese society. People use its text, call, and voice message functions for both personal and business communications. Many vendors in China prefer its mobile payment capabilities to cash.

WEIBO: A popular Chinese microblogging social media platform similar to Twitter.

XUEBA: (□□) Literally “academic tyrant,” this is a slang term for high-achieving students. Usually complimentary.

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Cruel tyrant Taxian-jun killed his way to the throne and now reigns as the first-ever emperor of the mortal realm. Yet somehow, he is unsatisfied. Left cold and bereft, abandoned by all he held dear, he takes his own life...only to be reborn anew.

Awakening in the body of his younger self—Mo Ran, a disciple of the cultivation sect Sisheng Peak—he discovers the chance to relive his life. This time, he vows to attain the gratification that once eluded him: all who defied him will fall, and never again will they treat him like a dog. His greatest fury is reserved for Chu Wanning, the coldly beautiful and aloofly cat-like cultivation teacher who betrayed and thwarted Mo Ran time and again in their last life. Yet as Mo Ran shamelessly pursues his own goals in this life he thought lost, he begins to wonder if there might be more to his teacher—and his own feelings—than he ever realized.

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FROM THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE HUSKY AND HIS WHITE CAT SHIZUN

ROU BAO BU CHI ROU

Noble-born Mo Xi is the foremost general of Chonghua, known for his ruthless temper and ascetic air. Once he was one of two promising young commanders, twin stars of the empire. His comrade, the lowborn Gu Mang, was Mo Xi's brother-in-arms, best friend, and—secretly—his lover, until the day Gu Mang turned traitor and joined the ranks of their nation's greatest enemy.

Now Gu Mang has been returned to the empire a ruined man, a shadow of the military genius he once was. The public clamors for his death, and no one yearns for vengeance more than Mo Xi. Or so he thought—for faced once more with his bitterest enemy, Mo Xi is left with more questions than answers. Why did the man he loved betray him? And what secrets hide behind Gu Mang's tortured eyes?

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REMNANTS of FILTH

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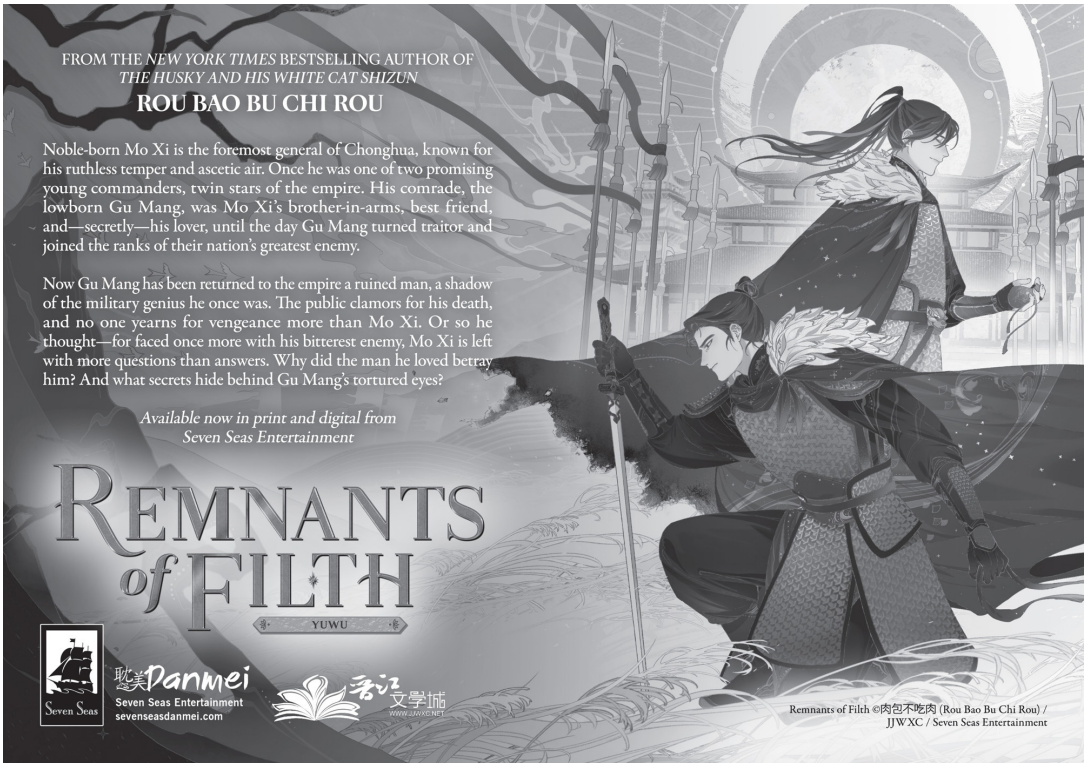

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Footnotes

Chapter 152: Our Affair Was Discovered

[1] 520 is pronounced similarly to the phrase “I love you” in Chinese, and so the numbers are often used to mean the same thing—the romantic implication has spilled over to 521, which is easier to communicate via foot tap.

Chapter 163: So Mad You Pass Out

[2] F4 was a 2000s boy band formed by four members of the cast of the explosively popular Taiwanese drama Meteor Garden.

Chapter 169: Don’t Ignore Me

[3] Ximen Qing is a character in the Ming dynasty classics Water Margin and Plum in the Golden Vase, known for his immoral sexual exploits.

Chapter 171: I Never Would Have Thought

[4] “Lao-san” literally means “old number three”—Wei Dongheng is the family’s third son, and this is a casual and affectionate way for his family members to refer to him.

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